Between National Agendas and Regional Integration: Governance of Higher Education Internationalization in China and Thailand under ASEAN Frameworks

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Abstract

This paper examines how China and Thailand govern the internationalization of their higher education systems in relation to the ASEAN regional framework. Drawing on multi-level governance (MLG) theory and DiMaggio and Powell's institutional isomorphism framework, the study conducts a comparative analysis of 105 documents issued between 2015 and 2024, comprising 74 policy documents from the supranational and national levels and 31 institutional documents from six purposively selected universities. At the supranational level, ASEAN's higher education governance architecture, comprising AUN-QA, ACTS, and AQAN, exposes national actors to regional norms without imposing binding obligations, since it has neither compliance mechanisms nor enforcement authority. At the national level, the two cases diverge. China endorses ASEAN frameworks in policy rhetoric but pursues cooperation through bilateral Belt and Road Initiative channels, a pattern we term strategic normative adaptation. Thailand engages ASEAN mechanisms more directly and treats AUN-QA as a legitimacy reference, yet fragmented governance and the lack of national instruments to embed regional standards leave its response predominantly mimetic. At the institutional level, Chinese universities calibrate international engagement against global rankings and BRI partnerships rather than ASEAN frameworks, while Thai universities use AUN-QA endorsement as a source of institutional legitimacy. Across the three levels, the two countries converge in governance language but diverge in governance logic. This finding has implications beyond the bilateral case: because ASEAN relies on normative persuasion, it tends to advantage large, strategically coherent actors whose governance logics depart from the framework's integrationist intent.

Keywords: Higher education internationalization; Multi-level governance; Institutional isomorphism; ASEAN; China; Thailand; Comparative education policy; Belt and Road Initiative; Regional governance; AUN-QA

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the internationalization of higher education has shifted from a peripheral concern of national policy agendas to one of the defining governance challenges of contemporary higher education systems worldwide. What was once largely understood as the mobility of students and scholars across borders has evolved into a complex, multi-dimensional policy terrain encompassing curriculum reform, quality assurance, institutional partnerships, and the deliberate projection of national educational capacity onto regional and global stages (Knight, 2008; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Reflecting this broader scope, de Wit et al. (2015) defined internationalization as an intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education. The scale of this transformation is considerable: the global number of internationally mobile students surpassed five million by 2017 and is projected to

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continue growing, driven in large part by demographic expansion and rising middle-class aspirations across Asia (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Yet this quantitative growth has been accompanied by a more consequential qualitative shift in governance, one in which national governments no longer operate as the sole, or even the primary, architects of internationalization policy. Regional organizations, multilateral accreditation bodies, and transnational knowledge networks have emerged as increasingly influential actors, reshaping the policy environments within which national higher education systems operate. Understanding how states navigate this more complex governance landscape, balancing domestic priorities against regional normative pressures, has become one of the central preoccupations of comparative higher education research.

It is within this context that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has emerged as one of the most consequential regional architectures shaping higher education governance in Asia. Since the formalization of the ASEAN Community in 2015, regional mechanisms dedicated to higher education have proliferated significantly. The ASEAN University Network (AUN), the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS), and the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) have collectively sought to harmonize degree structures, enhance student mobility, and establish shared benchmarks for institutional quality across a region that is home to more than 620 million people, roughly a quarter of whom were aged 15–29 in 2015, a population that represents a substantial and growing source of higher education demand (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). More recently, the formal launch in 2022 of the Roadmap on the ASEAN Higher Education Space 2025, co-developed with the EU-funded SHARE programme, has signaled an increasingly institutionalized ambition to create something analogous to a Southeast Asian higher education common space. Yet as Schreurs (2010) observed, the "ASEAN way" of regional governance remains a distinctively task-specific and consensus-driven form of coordination, one that operates through voluntary compliance and normative persuasion rather than through the delegated or binding authority characteristic of the European Bologna Process. This structural softness raises important and underexplored questions: how do national governments actually respond to regional normative pressure in such a governance environment, and does alignment with ASEAN frameworks represent genuine policy convergence, strategic rhetorical adaptation, or something more variable and contingent?

These questions are particularly pressing in light of the broader geopolitical reconfiguration underway in Asian higher education. The rise of China as both a regional and global actor in higher education governance has introduced new dynamics that sit uneasily alongside the ASEAN multilateral framework. Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, and more explicitly since its incorporation of higher education as a strategic dimension in 2016, China has pursued an internationalization agenda that is simultaneously regional and global in scope, framing educational cooperation as a vehicle for soft power projection, talent cultivation, and people-to-people connectivity across six economic corridors (Ge & Ho, 2022). By 2019, China had reached mutual recognition of academic qualifications with 24 Belt and Road countries (Huang, 2020), while the University Alliance of the Silk Road had grown to encompass more than 130 member institutions across five continents (Huang, 2019). China's Double First-Class Initiative, launched in 2016, further reflects the state's ambition to build world-class universities capable of competing at the apex of global academic hierarchies, explicitly linking institutional internationalization with national strategic interests in a way that is both top-down and highly centralized (Zheng & Li, 2025). In this configuration, ASEAN serves less as a normative authority than as a strategic opportunity: a regional platform through which China can extend educational influence while simultaneously advancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation

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on its own terms.

Thailand, as a founding ASEAN member state, occupies a structurally different position within this regional landscape, and its governance of higher education internationalization reflects a correspondingly different set of pressures and constraints. Since the promulgation of the First 15-Year Long-Range Plan on Higher Education (1990–2004), Thailand has made progressive, if uneven, efforts to internationalize its higher education system by expanding joint degree programs, growing international student enrollment, and engaging with AUN quality assurance frameworks (Jampaklay et al., 2022). The Thailand 4.0 development strategy, introduced under the Prayuth administration, elevated these ambitions considerably, positioning international talent attraction and cross-border academic cooperation as central instruments for escaping the middle-income trap and building competitive advantage in targeted high-value industries (Buasuwan, 2018). The institutional architecture for managing these ambitions has undergone considerable restructuring: the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC), which had served as the primary regulatory body since 2003, was reorganized into the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) in 2019, reflecting a broader effort to integrate higher education governance with national research and innovation policy. Yet despite this structural ambition, the translation of internationalization policy intent into consistent institutional practice has remained constrained by limited budgetary support, linguistic barriers, and what several analysts have identified as a historically reactive rather than proactive governance culture within Thai higher education administration (Jampaklay et al., 2022; Buasuwan, 2018).

The juxtaposition of these two national cases, China and Thailand, thus presents an analytically productive comparative opportunity that the existing literature has not fully exploited. Both countries are deeply implicated in ASEAN higher education frameworks, yet from substantively different positions: China as a dialogue partner whose educational influence increasingly permeates the region, and Thailand as a member state navigating between domestic reform pressures and the normative expectations of regional integration. Both have articulated ambitious internationalization agendas, yet the governance logics underwriting those agendas differ in significant ways: in the degree of central state control, in the relationship between national and regional policy priorities, and in the mechanisms through which institutional-level practices are shaped and evaluated. Crucially, neither country's engagement with ASEAN higher education frameworks is well captured by prevailing accounts of regional governance that assume a relatively linear relationship between supranational normative pressure and national policy adaptation. The governance dynamics at play are rather more fragmented, strategically selective, and context-dependent than such accounts suggest.

Despite the analytical richness of this pairing, the comparative governance of higher education internationalization in China and Thailand has received remarkably little systematic attention in the international scholarly literature. Existing scholarship has largely addressed each country in isolation, or has embedded them within broader regional surveys that lack the sustained bilateral depth necessary to illuminate governance dynamics. Studies of Chinese higher education internationalization have focused predominantly on outbound dimensions such as BRI university alliances, the political economy of Confucius Institutes, and the growth of inbound international student recruitment (Ge & Ho, 2022; Liu et al., 2025), while analyses of Thailand have concentrated on institutional and linguistic barriers rather than on the governance architecture through which national and regional policy imperatives are mediated (Jampaklay et al., 2022; Buasuwan, 2018). The few comparative studies operating at the regional level, notably Chou and Ravinet's (2017) examination of higher education regionalism in

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Europe and Southeast Asia and Jayasuriya and Robertson's (2010) foundational work on regulatory regionalism and higher education governance, have drawn important conceptual distinctions between European and Asian governance models but do not undertake sustained bilateral comparison between individual ASEAN-adjacent states. Chou and Ravinet's (2015) broader agenda-setting contribution to the Palgrave International Handbook of Higher Education Policy and Governance similarly identified higher education regionalism as a productive but underexplored research domain, without specifically engaging the China–Thailand comparative dynamic. As a result, no study has yet examined, within a single analytical framework, how China as an ASEAN dialogue partner and Thailand as an ASEAN member state govern internationalization in relation to the same regional architecture, or why their responses to identical regional instruments differ. This is the gap the present paper addresses.

We ask: how do China and Thailand govern the internationalization of their higher education systems in relation to the ASEAN regional framework, and what does a comparative examination of these two cases reveal about the relationship between national policy agendas and regional integration pressures in an Asian governance context? We argue that while both countries have formally embraced the discourse of ASEAN-aligned internationalization, their underlying governance logics are substantively distinct. China operates from an outward-oriented, soft-power-driven framework in which regional integration serves primarily as a vehicle for national strategic expansion, while Thailand navigates a more reactive posture shaped by domestic reform imperatives and the institutional constraints of a less centralized governance architecture. Crucially, we further argue that the apparent tension between convergence and divergence in the two countries' policy responses cannot be adequately explained by reference to structural variables alone; it requires attention to the mechanisms through which regional normative pressures are selectively absorbed, reinterpreted, and institutionally embedded at the national level.

To develop this argument, the paper draws on multi-level governance (MLG) theory (Hooghe & Marks, 2003) as a primary analytical framework, situating the governance of higher education internationalization across three analytically distinct but mutually constituted levels: the supranational (ASEAN regional mechanisms and their normative frameworks), the national (state policy architectures in China and Thailand), and the institutional (university-level practices and responses to national and regional mandates). This framework is supplemented by DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) account of institutional isomorphism, which provides a theoretical vocabulary for examining the mechanisms (coercive, mimetic, and normative) through which regional governance pressures are transmitted and differentially absorbed at the national level. The two frameworks answer different questions. MLG identifies where authority over internationalization sits and how the supranational, national, and institutional levels are connected, while institutional isomorphism explains why actors at a given level adopt, adapt, or set aside the norms that reach them. In the ASEAN setting, where regional bodies set norms but cannot enforce them, MLG alone would describe the architecture without explaining divergent national responses, and isomorphism alone would identify mechanisms without locating them in a governance structure. Together, these frameworks enable movement beyond descriptive comparison toward a theoretically grounded account of why two countries facing ostensibly similar regional governance environments have responded in markedly divergent ways.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant scholarly literature on higher education internationalization governance and ASEAN regionalism, identifying the key conceptual contributions and empirical gaps that motivate the current study. Section 3 elaborates the theoretical framework in detail. Section 4 describes the methodological approach, which combines comparative

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policy document analysis with systematic thematic coding of primary and secondary sources spanning the period 2015–2024. Sections 5 and 6 present and discuss the empirical findings organized around the three analytical levels of the MLG framework. Section 7 concludes with a statement of theoretical contributions, policy implications for both national governments and ASEAN institutional actors, and directions for future comparative research.

2. Literature Review

This review moves from the general to the specific. It begins with the shift toward governance in research on internationalization, turns to multi-level governance and higher education regionalism in Southeast Asia, and then reviews the national literatures on China and Thailand before setting out the gap this study addresses.

2.1 The Governance Turn in Higher Education Internationalization

The scholarly study of higher education internationalization has undergone a significant reorientation over the past two decades. Early research in the field was largely descriptive and institutionally focused, concerned primarily with the mechanics of student exchange programs, curriculum reform, and the organizational strategies through which individual universities pursued international engagement (Knight, 2008). What has changed, and changed substantially, is the analytical lens through which these activities are now examined. From the mid-2000s onward, a growing body of literature began shifting attention from the activities of internationalization to the governance structures that enable, constrain, and direct those activities, a development several scholars have described as the "governance turn" in higher education research (Chou & Ravinet, 2015; Jayasuriya & Robertson, 2010). This shift reflects a broader recognition that internationalization is not simply a market-driven or institutionally autonomous process but is deeply embedded in multi-scalar political economies in which states, regional bodies, international organizations, and private actors all exercise varying degrees of influence.

Central to this reorientation is the question of what actually drives policy convergence across national higher education systems. The prevailing assumption in much earlier comparative work was that globalization exerted a relatively uniform pressure on national governments, pushing them toward common repertoires of reform, including managerialism, quality assurance, rankings competition, and market-oriented student recruitment (Mok, 2007). This assumption is captured most directly in the neoliberal institutionalist account, which holds that the diffusion of New Public Management models into higher education governance reflects the hegemonic authority of international organizations such as the World Bank, the OECD, and UNESCO over the policy frames available to national governments (Mok, 2007; Ratanawijitrasin, 2015). Mok's (2007) comparative study of Malaysia and Thailand, for example, documented how both countries pursued strikingly similar corporatization and privatization strategies in their public universities during the late 1990s and early 2000s, not because of bilateral learning, but because both were responding to the same global discourse of new university governance. This finding raised important questions about the relationship between structural isomorphism and national agency that would come to define subsequent comparative work in the field.

The institutional isomorphism framework developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) has proven particularly useful for theorizing these dynamics, even as it has required considerable adaptation to address the specificities of higher education governance. In their original formulation, DiMaggio and Powell distinguished three mechanisms through which organizations come to resemble one another within a common field: coercive isomorphism, arising from formal and informal political pressures;

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mimetic isomorphism, driven by imitation under conditions of uncertainty; and normative isomorphism, arising from the diffusion of professional standards and shared epistemic frameworks. Applied to higher education governance, these mechanisms map onto recognizable empirical phenomena. Quality assurance requirements attached to international recognition frameworks constitute a form of coercive pressure; the widespread adoption of world university ranking metrics by governments seeking international visibility exemplifies mimetic dynamics; and the spread of professional norms through international higher education associations and academic networks illustrates normative isomorphism (Chou & Ravinet, 2017). The framework's value lies precisely in its capacity to distinguish between these mechanisms, enabling researchers to ask not merely whether convergence has occurred but through what channels and with what implications for national policy autonomy.

Yet DiMaggio and Powell's framework was developed in the context of organizational fields defined by market competition, and its direct application to state-level governance requires theoretical mediation. When the field in question is not a marketplace but a regional governance architecture, structured by multilateral agreements, soft law instruments, and politically negotiated normative frameworks, the mechanism of isomorphic pressure operates differently. It is partly for this reason that the governance turn in higher education has increasingly looked to multi-level governance theory as a complementary analytical resource, particularly for comparative work at the intersection of national and regional policy processes.

2.2 Multi-Level Governance and Higher Education Regionalism

The concept of multi-level governance, developed originally by Marks (1993) and subsequently elaborated in collaboration with Hooghe (Hooghe & Marks, 2003), was forged in the study of European integration and the redistribution of policy authority upward to supranational institutions and downward to subnational actors. The core proposition is that governance authority is not simply delegated from states to international bodies, but is characterized by the simultaneous involvement of actors at multiple levels who possess overlapping jurisdictions and whose interactions are not reducible to hierarchical command. Hooghe and Marks (2003) further distinguished between two types of multi-level governance: Type I, characterized by general-purpose jurisdictions organized at a limited number of levels (most closely resembling federal arrangements), and Type II, characterized by task-specific, flexible, and overlapping jurisdictions that are purpose-built for particular governance challenges.

The application of MLG theory to higher education governance beyond Europe has been more recent and remains comparatively underdeveloped, but is growing. Chou and Ravinet's (2015) agenda-setting contribution to the Palgrave International Handbook of Higher Education Policy and Governance was among the first systematic efforts to theorize what they termed "higher education regionalism", defined as a political project of region creation involving state authority in the higher education policy sector, as a phenomenon deserving analytical attention in its own right, distinct from both global governance and national policy analysis. Their subsequent comparative study (Chou & Ravinet, 2017) examined higher education regionalism in Europe and Southeast Asia side by side, identifying important structural and ideational differences between the two cases. Where the European Bologna Process exhibits features of a relatively institutionalized, normatively convergent governance regime in which voluntary participation has progressively given way to monitored coordination, the ASEAN case displays a markedly more fragmented pattern, characterized by functional specialization, overlapping organizational mandates, and weak compliance mechanisms. Schreurs (2010) had earlier characterized the ASEAN model as exhibiting features of Hooghe and Marks's Type II multi-level governance, with task-specific bodies such as AUN and SEAMEO-RIHED operating in parallel without

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strong hierarchical coordination. This line of work draws on the new regionalism literature, which treats regions as socially constructed and as varying in their degree of "regionness" (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000).

Ratanawijitrasin (2015) provided a detailed empirical account of the structural landscape within which these governance dynamics unfold in Southeast Asia, documenting the simultaneous pressures of massification, privatization, and regional integration that have reshaped the region's higher education systems since the 1990s. Her analysis is particularly attentive to the divergent governance capacities of ASEAN member states, noting that the structural asymmetry between more developed systems, such as Singapore and Malaysia, and less developed ones creates inherent tensions within any regional harmonization project. These asymmetries are not merely a practical obstacle to integration; they are constitutive of the governance dynamics at the regional level, shaping which actors hold agenda-setting power and which are primarily positioned as recipients of normative transfer.

The regulatory regionalism framework associated with Jayasuriya and Robertson (2010) offers a useful complement to the MLG perspective, particularly for understanding how regional governance operates not only through formal supranational mechanisms but through the transformation of domestic regulatory architectures. Their core argument is that regionalism in higher education should be understood not as a process of authority transfer from states to regional bodies, but as a restructuring of the domestic regulatory state itself in response to regional governance pressures. In this account, the important analytical unit is not the regional institution but the domestic political economy, that is, the way in which national governments selectively adopt regional norms, translate them into domestic regulatory instruments, and deploy them in service of state interests that may have limited connection to the officially stated rationale of regional cooperation. This perspective introduces a layer of analytical complexity that pure MLG accounts sometimes understate: states are not passive objects of regional governance but active agents who strategically engage with regional frameworks in ways shaped by their own institutional histories, political economies, and developmental trajectories. These regional accounts set the context for the national literatures reviewed below, which show how two states with very different governance capacities have positioned themselves in relation to this architecture.

2.3 China's Higher Education Internationalization: State-Led Expansion and Strategic Positioning

The internationalization of Chinese higher education over the past three decades represents one of the most consequential transformations in the global higher education landscape. Chan and Wu (2020) documented the remarkable growth of international student enrollment in China between 2003 and 2016, from approximately 77,000 to nearly 443,000 students, and analyzed the governance logics underpinning this expansion, arguing that China's approach to international student mobility has shifted from an earlier emphasis on diplomatic hospitality toward a more explicitly strategic model oriented around soft power projection and the construction of governance legitimacy. This transition, they contend, reflects the broader evolution of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping, in which higher education has become an increasingly prominent instrument of "major country diplomacy."

The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, and its formal incorporation of educational cooperation as a strategic dimension in 2016, marked a qualitative shift in the governance of Chinese higher education internationalization. Ge and Ho (2022) analyzed the implications of the BRI for China's tertiary education internationalization policy, identifying three interconnected dimensions of change: the construction of international education networks along the six BRI economic corridors; the elevation of vocational colleges as new actors in international educational cooperation; and the

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promotion of Mandarin as a component of China's global cultural strategy. Crucially, their analysis shows that the BRI has not simply expanded the geographic scope of Chinese higher education cooperation but has restructured the domestic governance of internationalization, centralizing strategic authority within the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs while creating new institutional intermediaries tasked with operationalizing the national agenda at the institutional and regional level.

The Double First-Class Initiative, launched in 2016, constitutes the domestic counterpart to this outward-facing agenda. Zheng and Li (2025) argued in their critical policy analysis that the second round of the initiative reflects China's commitment to developing an internationalization strategy with explicitly "Chinese characteristics", one that simultaneously pursues world-class status according to globally recognized benchmarks while maintaining strong state oversight over the direction and content of international academic engagement. The initiative's emphasis on disciplinary strength, research output, and international faculty recruitment is thus simultaneously about global competitiveness and about the state's capacity to legitimate its own educational governance model on the world stage. Liu and colleagues (2025) extended this analysis by examining the role of Chinese universities in China's BRI specifically as a form of knowledge diplomacy, arguing that higher education cooperation has become a mechanism through which China seeks to embed its governance norms and development philosophy within partner countries, particularly across the Global South.

2.4 Thailand's Higher Education Internationalization: Governance Structures and Reform Trajectories

The internationalization of Thai higher education has developed along a structurally different trajectory, shaped by a governance architecture that has historically balanced central state direction with considerable institutional autonomy, and by a development agenda that has framed internationalization primarily in terms of economic competitiveness rather than geopolitical positioning. The foundations of Thailand's systematic approach to higher education internationalization were laid by the First 15-Year Long-Range Plan on Higher Education (1990–2004), which established internationalization as a formal policy priority for the first time and created institutional mechanisms, notably through the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC), for coordinating cross-border academic cooperation (Jampaklay et al., 2022). Subsequent long-range plans reinforced these commitments, though the translation of stated policy goals into consistent institutional practice proved more difficult than the plans anticipated.

Buasuwan (2018) provided a critical examination of the Thailand 4.0 strategy's implications for higher education, arguing that while the strategy's ambition to reposition Thailand as an innovation-driven economy was genuine, the governance instruments deployed to advance this ambition remained largely inherited from earlier reform cycles. The expansion of international degree programs, the growth of English-medium instruction, and the drive to attract foreign students, particularly from neighboring CLMV countries, were all framed within the Thailand 4.0 discourse, but the underlying governance mechanisms for quality assurance, credit recognition, and institutional accountability remained underdeveloped relative to the scale of aspiration. This gap between rhetorical ambition and governance capacity is a recurring theme in the literature on Thai higher education reform and is closely connected to broader questions about the institutional culture of Thai higher education administration (Jampaklay et al., 2022).

The 2019 restructuring of OHEC into the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) represented the most significant governance change in Thai higher education in

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nearly two decades. The restructuring was intended to break down longstanding silos between higher education policy, research funding, and innovation governance, and to create a more integrated institutional architecture capable of coordinating Thailand's ambitions in the knowledge economy. As Rangsan's (2025) analysis of the MHESI era has noted, this structural change introduced new governance logics, including performance metrics, university clustering strategies, and output-based funding formulas, that reflect a broader shift toward managerial accountability within the Thai higher education system. Whether these changes have substantively altered the governance of internationalization, or have instead reinforced existing patterns of central direction and institutional compliance, remains an open empirical question that this paper seeks to address.

2.5 Identifying the Research Gap

Taken together, the literature reviewed above reveals several important lacunae that motivate the present study. First, while the governance turn in higher education research has generated productive theoretical frameworks such as MLG, institutional isomorphism, and regulatory regionalism, these have been applied predominantly to European cases or to broad regional comparisons, with insufficient attention to the bilateral governance dynamics between ASEAN member states and ASEAN dialogue partners. Second, the literature on Chinese higher education internationalization has focused primarily on outward-facing strategies and global positioning, with comparatively limited attention to how China's educational governance model intersects with and shapes the governance architectures of neighboring ASEAN states. Third, studies of Thai higher education governance have remained largely self-contained, rarely engaging the comparative analytical frameworks available from the wider governance literature. The absence of sustained comparative work examining China and Thailand through a common governance lens therefore constitutes a genuine gap in the literature, which this paper addresses by applying the MLG and institutional isomorphism frameworks to a systematic comparison of the two countries' engagement with ASEAN higher education governance mechanisms.

This study responds to these gaps in three ways. Empirically, it brings supranational, national, and institutional documents from both countries into a single corpus, so that Chinese and Thai responses to the same regional instruments, notably AUN-QA and ACTS, can be compared directly rather than inferred from separate single-country studies. Analytically, it treats China's position as a dialogue partner and Thailand's position as a member state as a condition that shapes how regional norms are received, a distinction that broad regional surveys tend to flatten (Chou & Ravinet, 2017; Cabanda et al., 2019). Theoretically, it asks which isomorphic mechanism predominates in each case and why, which allows the comparison to speak to the conditions under which regional soft governance produces convergence in practice rather than in language alone.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Why Two Theories? The Logic of Integration

Choosing a theoretical framework for a comparative governance study is not a purely technical exercise; it is a substantive analytical decision about what aspects of the phenomenon matter most and what kinds of explanation are being sought. The present paper brings together two complementary bodies of theory, multi-level governance (MLG) and institutional isomorphism, not as a mechanical pairing but because each addresses a dimension of the research problem that the other, on its own, cannot fully capture.

MLG provides the structural architecture. It maps out the governance terrain across which China and Thailand's internationalization policies move, identifies the relevant actors and their relationships

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at each level, and asks where authority actually resides in the governance of higher education internationalization under the ASEAN regional framework. Institutional isomorphism, by contrast, supplies the dynamic mechanism. It theorizes the processes through which normative pressures at the regional and global level translate into national policy responses, often selectively, incompletely, and sometimes only rhetorically. Used in conjunction, the two frameworks enable this study to address both the structure of governance (who has authority, at which level, in what relationship to other levels) and the dynamics of policy change (why do states respond differently to ostensibly similar pressures, and through what channels does normative influence flow). The sections that follow develop each framework in turn, before showing how they are integrated into a unified analytical instrument for the empirical analysis that follows.

3.2 Multi-Level Governance: Origins, Core Claims, and Application

The concept of multi-level governance was first introduced by Gary Marks (1993) in his analysis of European cohesion policy, where he observed that the management of structural funds in the European Community involved not a single sovereign authority but a continuous negotiation among supranational, national, and subnational actors whose jurisdictions overlapped and whose interactions were not reducible to any clear hierarchical command. The concept was subsequently elaborated and theorized in collaboration with Liesbet Hooghe, most systematically in their joint monograph (Hooghe & Marks, 2001) and their landmark 2003 article in the American Political Science Review, in which they distinguished two analytically separable types of multi-level governance. Type I governance is characterized by general-purpose, non-intersecting, durable jurisdictions arranged at a limited number of levels, resembling in its basic logic the architecture of federal political systems. Type II governance, by contrast, involves task-specific, flexible, and potentially intersecting jurisdictions designed to address particular policy problems, with no fixed number of levels and no requirement for territorial exclusivity (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). The practical implication of this distinction is significant: not all multi-level governance looks like the EU's relatively codified jurisdictional hierarchy. Governance arrangements can be simultaneously multi-level and loosely structured, a point that proves directly relevant to understanding how ASEAN higher education governance actually works.

Piattoni's (2010) later theoretical elaboration clarified the conceptual, empirical, and normative claims of MLG, showing that the concept is useful because it captures decision-making arrangements that simultaneously mobilize actors across jurisdictional levels while remaining insufficiently formalized to constitute genuine delegation of sovereign authority. This description fits the ASEAN higher education governance landscape with notable precision. Bodies such as the ASEAN University Network (AUN), the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS), and the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) are plainly supranational in their aspiration, since they seek to establish common standards and enable cross-border mobility, but they lack coercive enforcement authority, and compliance with their frameworks is voluntary. National governments retain full formal sovereignty over the structure and content of their higher education systems. What MLG captures, and what purely state-centric analysis misses, is that this formal retention of sovereignty coexists with a real and consequential normative environment at the supranational level, one that shapes what is politically and institutionally feasible for national governments even in the absence of binding obligations.

For the present study, the MLG framework is operationalized across three analytically distinct but empirically interdependent levels.

The supranational level encompasses the ASEAN institutional architecture for higher education coordination, including its declarations, quality assurance networks, credit transfer frameworks, and

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mobility programs, as well as the broader international normative environment constituted by UNESCO frameworks, global university rankings, and the governance discourse of multilateral development banks. The national level encompasses the policy architectures through which China and Thailand govern higher education internationalization, including legislative frameworks, ministry-level strategies, funding instruments, and planning documents. The institutional level encompasses the actual practices of individual universities: how they respond to national mandates, engage with regional quality frameworks, recruit international students, and build transnational partnerships. Analytically, the framework directs attention to both vertical dynamics (how normative pressures and policy mandates flow across levels, and with what degree of fidelity or distortion) and horizontal dynamics (how China and Thailand compare at each level, and where the governance logics most sharply diverge).

A further conceptual resource within the MLG tradition that informs this study is the notion of path dependency, drawn from Pierson's (2004) work on historical institutionalism. Path dependency holds that earlier institutional choices constrain the range of feasible options available to later actors, generating self-reinforcing patterns that can persist long after the original conditions that prompted them have changed. In the context of this study, path dependency helps explain why China and Thailand's governance responses to ASEAN regional frameworks differ not only in their current strategic orientation but in their underlying institutional DNA: China's highly centralized, ministry-coordinated governance architecture reflects decades of state-directed higher education reform, while Thailand's more fragmented structure bears the marks of successive reform attempts that have repeatedly stopped short of fundamental restructuring (Ratanawijitrasin, 2015; Mok, 2007). These institutionally embedded differences shape not just what each country does in response to regional governance pressures, but what it is able to do, given the administrative capacities and organizational cultures of its higher education bureaucracy.

3.3 Institutional Isomorphism: Mechanism and Scope

While MLG tells us where governance authority is located and how it is distributed across levels, it does not by itself explain why national policy systems tend to resemble one another in certain respects while remaining divergent in others. This is where DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) framework of institutional isomorphism becomes indispensable. Their central argument, developed in a paper that has become one of the most cited in organizational sociology, is that organizations operating within a common institutional field tend to become structurally similar not because similarity is intrinsically efficient, but because the field itself exerts pressures, through legal mandates, cultural expectations, and professional norms, that reward conformity and penalize deviance. They identify three analytically distinct mechanisms through which isomorphic change occurs:

Coercive isomorphism results from formal and informal pressures exerted by organizations upon which a focal organization is dependent, including legal requirements, regulatory frameworks, and the expectations of powerful external actors. In higher education governance, coercive pressures include the accreditation requirements attached to participation in international quality assurance frameworks, the conditionality attached to development funding from international organizations, and the formal requirements of bilateral or multilateral agreements covering credit recognition and degree equivalence.

Mimetic isomorphism results from imitation under conditions of uncertainty. When organizations are unsure how to achieve their goals, or when goals themselves are ambiguous or contested, they tend to model themselves on organizations perceived to be successful or legitimate. In higher education, mimetic pressures are powerfully mediated by global university rankings, which create a common template of "world-class" institutional form that governments and universities worldwide are drawn to

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emulate, as well as by the diffusion of governance models from more internationally visible systems.

Normative isomorphism stems from professionalization, that is, the spread of shared cognitive frameworks, standards of appropriate practice, and normative expectations through professional communities, academic networks, and transnational expert bodies. In higher education, the annual conferences, joint publications, and institutional memberships that link higher education administrators, quality assurance professionals, and policy advisors across national boundaries constitute a powerful conduit for normative isomorphism, shaping what counts as legitimate practice even in the absence of formal requirements.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) developed these distinctions within the context of organizational fields defined primarily by market competition, and their application to state-level governance requires analytical translation. Powell and DiMaggio (1991) later acknowledged this limitation, noting that the framework requires adaptation when the "organizational field" in question is a politically constituted governance arena rather than a product market. For the purposes of this study, we treat the ASEAN higher education governance space as constituting precisely such a field: a space structured by shared normative expectations, institutional memberships, and regular interactions among actors who monitor each other's behavior and adjust their own accordingly. Within this field, both China and Thailand are subject to isomorphic pressures, but the mechanism through which those pressures operate differs between the two cases in ways that this study seeks to specify empirically.

3.4 Integrating the Frameworks: A Unified Analytical Logic

The integration of MLG and institutional isomorphism in this study proceeds along the following analytical logic. MLG provides the structural map: it identifies the relevant governance levels, specifies the actors at each level, and describes the formal and informal authority relationships between them. Institutional isomorphism provides the dynamic account: it explains what drives change (and resistance to change) at each level, and why governance actors respond to regional normative environments in the particular ways they do. Specifically, we argue that the three isomorphic mechanisms identified by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) can be mapped onto the vertical dynamics of the MLG framework as follows:

At the supranational-to-national interface, coercive and normative isomorphic pressures are most active: ASEAN quality assurance requirements, credit recognition frameworks, and ministerial-level declarations create normative expectations that national governments are implicitly expected to align with, even in the absence of binding enforcement.

At the national-to-institutional interface, mimetic pressures are especially prominent: universities in both China and Thailand respond to the governance incentives created by national policies (funding formulas, world-class university programs, quality assessments) by adopting organizational forms that resemble those of internationally recognized peers, whether or not those forms fit the particular institutional context.

Within each national level, the interaction between isomorphic pressures and path-dependent governance structures determines the degree of genuine policy change as opposed to what Meyer and Rowan (1977) termed "decoupling", that is, the adoption of externally legitimate organizational forms without corresponding changes in actual practice.

Read together, these three propositions form a single argument. Regional norms reach national governments mainly through coercive and normative channels; national governments filter those norms through their own path-dependent structures; and universities then respond to whichever incentives survive that filtering, often by imitating recognized peers. The outcome at the institutional level

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therefore depends less on the content of ASEAN norms than on how each national system mediates them. For this reason, the analysis compares China and Thailand at every level rather than at the national level alone, and treats the national level as the point at which the two cases are most likely to diverge.

This framework generates the comparative analytical questions that structure the empirical sections of this paper. At the supranational level, we ask: what are the normative expectations embedded in ASEAN higher education governance frameworks, and how clearly are they communicated to national actors? At the national level, we ask: through what governance mechanisms do China and Thailand translate (or fail to translate) these normative expectations into domestic policy, and how do their respective governance architectures shape this process? At the institutional level, we ask: how do the internationalization practices of universities in both countries reflect, respond to, or resist the governance signals transmitted from the national and supranational levels?

The framework also generates a specific comparative prediction: because China and Thailand enter this governance field from structurally different positions, one as a resource-rich dialogue partner with a strong central state and a clear geopolitical agenda, the other as a member state with a more fragmented governance architecture and a primarily economic rationale for internationalization, we would expect the dominant isomorphic mechanism to differ between the two cases. China's national governance of internationalization is more likely to exhibit features of strategic normative adaptation, engaging with ASEAN frameworks selectively and instrumentally, in ways that amplify China's regional influence, while Thailand's is more likely to exhibit mimetic patterns, borrowing organizational models from regional peers in an effort to manage uncertainty about the appropriate direction of reform. Whether this prediction holds up against the empirical evidence is precisely the question to which the remainder of this paper is addressed.

3.5 Scope Conditions and Limitations of the Framework

No theoretical framework is without limitations, and intellectual honesty requires that these be stated clearly rather than left for reviewers to discover. The first limitation concerns the level of analysis. Both MLG and institutional isomorphism were originally developed to explain dynamics at the organizational and system level; applying them to bilateral national comparisons involves a degree of abstraction that may obscure important subnational and intra-institutional variation. This paper does not claim to account for the full diversity of internationalization practices across Chinese or Thai higher education; it focuses on the national governance architecture and its relationship to the supranational level, while acknowledging that institutional-level behavior is considerably more varied than any national-level account can fully capture. Limitations arising from the research design and sample are discussed separately in Section 4.4.

The second limitation concerns the assumption of a bounded "field." Treating ASEAN higher education governance as a coherent organizational field carries the risk of overstating the degree of integration and mutual attention among actors within it. In practice, the field is fragmented, contested, and unevenly institutionalized, and many universities in both China and Thailand operate with limited awareness of or engagement with ASEAN-level governance frameworks. The framework is most useful as an analytical device for interrogating governance dynamics at the national and regional levels; its application to institutional practices requires empirical validation rather than theoretical assumption.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the integrated MLG and institutional isomorphism framework offers a more nuanced and theoretically productive analytical lens than either framework alone could provide. It is well suited to the specific empirical puzzle this paper addresses, namely why two countries exposed to the same regional governance environment have developed substantively different

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internationalization governance strategies, and it connects the empirical analysis to broader theoretical debates in comparative higher education and governance studies that extend well beyond the China–Thailand case.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a comparative case study design. The pairing of China and Thailand follows what George and Bennett (2005) describe as "structured, focused comparison": both countries face ostensibly similar regional normative pressures within the ASEAN higher education governance landscape yet have produced demonstrably different policy responses, making the pairing analytically productive rather than merely descriptive. Case study design is appropriate here because the governance dynamics under examination are inherently relational and context-sensitive, and because the theoretical claims being advanced concern causal mechanisms rather than population-level distributions (Yin, 2018).

4.2 Data Sources

The empirical analysis draws on a systematically assembled document corpus, organized according to the three levels of the MLG framework.

At the supranational level, documents include the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, the Guide to AUN-QA Assessment at Programme Level (Version 4.0, 2020), the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) operational guidelines, ASEAN Education Ministers' Meeting declarations (2015–2024), and the EU-funded SHARE Programme evaluation reports (2018 and 2022).

At the national level, the Chinese corpus encompasses the Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening-up of Education in the New Era (Ministry of Education, 2020), the Double First-Class Initiative implementation measures (2017 and 2022 versions), the Action Plan for Belt and Road Educational Cooperation (2016), and China Education Modernization 2035. The Thai corpus includes the Second 15-Year Long-Range Plan on Higher Education (2008–2022), the National Education Plan 2017–2036, the OHEC Strategic Plan for Higher Education 2017–2021, the MHESI Establishment Act (2019), and MHESI annual reports (2020–2023).

At the institutional level, a purposive sample of three universities per country was selected. The universities were selected on two criteria: prominence in national internationalization policy, and variation in the channels through which each institution engages Southeast Asian partners. For China: Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Yunnan University, representing elite Double First-Class institutions and a BRI-oriented regional university respectively. For Thailand: Chulalongkorn University, Mahidol University, and Chiang Mai University, representing research-intensive national universities with varying degrees of engagement with AUN quality assurance frameworks. Documents analyzed include internationalization white papers, AUN-QA self-assessment reports, and international office strategic plans. Institutional documents were included if they were issued between 2015 and 2024 and addressed internationalization strategy, international partnerships, or quality assurance.

The full corpus comprises 105 documents: 74 policy documents issued by ASEAN bodies at the supranational level and by Chinese and Thai government agencies at the national level, and 31 institutional documents drawn from the six case universities. Policy documents were retained if they were issued by a governmental or intergovernmental body, addressed higher education internationalization, cross-border cooperation, or quality assurance, and fell within the study period. The period 2015–2024 begins with the formal launch of the ASEAN Community and extends to the

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current policy cycle.

4.3 Analytical Approach

The analysis combined thematic coding with qualitative content analysis. Document analysis suits this study because policy texts record how governments state priorities and assign responsibilities, and because they permit systematic comparison across settings and over time (Bowen, 2009). Thematic coding followed the six phases set out by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. A hybrid deductive and inductive approach was used. The three MLG levels and the three isomorphic mechanisms (coercive, mimetic, and normative) served as a priori coding categories, and sub-themes that emerged from the documents were added to the codebook as they appeared.

The codebook specified a decision rule for each mechanism. A passage was coded as coercive when it attached a requirement, sanction, or funding condition to alignment with an external standard; as mimetic when it justified a measure by reference to the practice of peer systems or institutions, or to ranking positions; and as normative when it invoked professional standards or the expectations of regional and international networks without a formal requirement. Content analysis followed Mayring's (2000) model of deductive category application and tracked three concept clusters across the corpus: national agenda terms (for example, references to the Belt and Road Initiative, Double First-Class, or Thailand 4.0), regional alignment terms (for example, references to ASEAN, AUN-QA, ACTS, or the ASEAN Higher Education Space), and convergence or divergence indicators, that is, passages in which regional standards were adopted as targets, cited without operational follow-up, or replaced by national or bilateral alternatives.

The lead author and a research assistant coded the documents independently using the same codebook. Inter-coder reliability was assessed on a random 20% sample of the corpus (21 of 105 documents) using Cohen's (1960) kappa. Agreement reached $\kappa = 0.81$, which falls within the range conventionally interpreted as almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Remaining disagreements were resolved through discussion, and the codebook was updated accordingly.

4.4 Methodological Limitations

Two limitations of the research design should be noted. First, the institutional level rests on a purposive sample of three universities per country. These institutions are among the most internationally active in their systems, so the sample cannot capture the full diversity of Chinese and Thai higher education, including provincial, private, and vocational institutions whose engagement with ASEAN frameworks may differ considerably. The institutional findings should therefore be read as showing how national governance logics are expressed in leading universities, not as generalizations about either sector. Second, the analysis relies on documents. Policy texts show stated intentions and formal commitments, but they cannot show how those commitments are carried out in practice; this is why interview-based research is proposed as a direction for future work in Section 7.

5. Findings

Findings are organized across the three analytical levels of the MLG framework (supranational, national, and institutional), with China and Thailand analyzed in parallel at each level before a cross-level synthesis is offered.

5.1 The Supranational Level: Normative Reach and Structural Limits

ASEAN higher education governance operates through overlapping, task-specific bodies (AUN,

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ACTS, AQAN, and SEAMEO-RIHED) without a single coordinating authority, constituting what Hooghe and Marks (2003) classify as Type II multi-level governance.

Analysis of ASEAN Education Ministers' Meeting declarations from 2015 to 2024 reveals a consistent rhetorical commitment to regional harmonization, while compliance mechanisms, implementation timescales, and consequences for non-alignment remain entirely unspecified. This is not an oversight but a structural feature of ASEAN's consensus-based governance mode, which deliberately preserves national sovereignty over domestic education policy (Schreurs, 2010).

AUN-QA is the most operationally developed regional mechanism. Hundreds of programmes have undergone AUN-QA assessment, and in 2020 the network released version 4.0 of its programme-level assessment guide, which is oriented toward expected learning outcomes and continuous quality improvement (ASEAN University Network [AUN], 2020). Yet assessment is entirely voluntary and carries no national regulatory consequence. Universities pursue it primarily for the institutional legitimacy it confers, a pattern consistent with normative isomorphism rather than coercive compliance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

ACTS uptake has been more limited still. In the national documents analyzed, ACTS is either absent (China) or mentioned as an objective without a corresponding regulatory instrument (Thailand). The obstacle is not technical incompatibility but the absence of national regulatory frameworks requiring credit recognition, without which voluntary commitment proves insufficient to generate systemic mobility flows.

Taken together, the supranational architecture presents national actors with an environment of structured normative exposure rather than binding obligation. This makes national governance capacity and strategic orientation decisive in determining how regional normative pressure is absorbed, and it explains why China and Thailand respond differently to ostensibly identical governance environments.

5.2 The National Level: Divergent Governance Logics

5.2.1 China: State-Directed Strategic Expansion

The Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening-up of Education in the New Era (Ministry of Education, 2020) frames international educational cooperation as serving three simultaneous functions: enhancing global competitiveness, advancing the BRI, and projecting China's educational governance model as a legitimate alternative to Western-dominated academic norms. Measurable targets are set for international student recruitment, overseas campus development, and joint degree programs, with responsibility assigned to ministry-level coordination bodies rather than individual institutions, reflecting what Liu and colleagues (2025) describe as the "knowledge diplomacy" function of Chinese higher education.

The Double First-Class Initiative (2022 round) reinforces this logic by tying substantial funding to measurable internationalization outputs, but calibrates those outputs against global university rankings and Western academic benchmarks, not ASEAN quality standards (Zheng & Li, 2025). AUN-QA appears nowhere in the national-level documents as a governance metric; ASEAN features primarily as a geographic region containing BRI partner universities rather than as a quality reference framework.

The Action Plan for Belt and Road Educational Cooperation (2016) specifies cooperation instruments, including government scholarships, Confucius Institute expansion, and joint research platforms, that are bilateral and initiated by China rather than multilateral and mediated by ASEAN. Alongside these instruments, the University Alliance of the Silk Road had grown to more than 130 member institutions across five continents (Huang, 2019), forming a parallel cooperative network that

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operates largely independently of ASEAN governance frameworks.

The dominant isomorphic mechanism in China's case is strategic normative adaptation: selective adoption of regional alignment language while pursuing substantively different national goals through bilateral and BRI channels.

5.2.2 Thailand: Reactive Governance and the Implementation Gap

Thailand 4.0 (2016) positioned higher education internationalization as central to economic transformation, and the OHEC Strategic Plan 2017–2021 operationalized this through ambitious output targets: doubling international student enrollment, expanding jointly-supervised doctoral programs, and increasing AUN-QA participation. Yet the governance mechanisms for achieving these targets were significantly underdeveloped relative to the ambition, with coordination responsibilities between OHEC, universities, and line ministries largely unresolved (Buasuwan, 2018).

The establishment of MHESI in 2019 sought to address the fragmentation between higher education, research funding, and innovation governance, but path-dependent institutional cultures have constrained the pace of substantive change (Pierson, 2004; Rangsan, 2025). Where the Chinese documents assign responsibility for internationalization targets to ministry-level coordination bodies, the Thai documents leave much of that responsibility to individual universities without specifying how national targets are to be distributed among them. This difference in where responsibility sits underlies the contrast between the two national cases.

Thailand's engagement with ASEAN frameworks is substantially more direct than China's. OHEC strategic plans identify AUN-QA assessment as an explicit institutional performance indicator, and MHESI annual reports (2020–2023) track AUN membership and AUN-QA assessment rates as metrics for regional integration progress; no Chinese national-level document analyzed contains comparable indicators. For Thailand, AUN-QA functions as a genuine governance reference point, reflecting both its ASEAN membership and its universities' sensitivity to concerns about international academic credibility (Jampaklay et al., 2022; Welch, 2011).

Yet depth of engagement remains limited: ACTS has not been incorporated into national credit recognition regulation, leaving institutional uptake dependent on voluntary initiative. The dominant isomorphic mechanism in Thailand's case is mimetic isomorphism: under conditions of governance uncertainty and aspiration for international credibility, Thai universities and their governing ministry adopt ASEAN quality benchmarks as templates for legitimate organizational form, though the institutional change produced remains shallow relative to the scale of rhetorical commitment.

5.3 The Institutional Level: Selective Engagement and Decoupling

Institutional strategies in both countries reproduce the national logics identified above. At Peking University and Tsinghua University, international engagement is extensive but calibrated against global rankings and BRI bilateral partnerships, mirroring the Double First-Class priorities set at the national level. Neither university refers to AUN-QA or ACTS in its internationalization strategy, and ASEAN partner universities appear mainly as recipients of outbound cooperative programs rather than as peers within a shared regional quality framework. Yunnan University engages ASEAN partners more actively because of its border location and BRI designation, but it does so through government-to-government agreements and MOE-designated projects, the same bilateral channels that dominate national policy (Liu et al., 2025).

The Thai universities show a different pattern. Because national policy treats AUN-QA as a performance indicator without making it a requirement, each university decides how far to take it. Chulalongkorn has integrated AUN-QA standards into its internal quality assurance procedures, which

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goes beyond surface compliance. Mahidol uses AUN-QA outcomes mainly in external communications as evidence of institutional quality, the clearest case of mimetic isomorphism in the sample (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Chiang Mai engages selectively, with programme-level assessments and limited reference to ACTS in bilateral partnerships. The variation among the three reflects the national pattern: regional standards are encouraged, but whether they take hold depends on institutional initiative.

5.4 Cross-Level Synthesis: Convergence in Language, Divergence in Logic

Across all three levels, the findings generate a consistent comparative pattern: both countries endorse the ASEAN higher education governance framework in formal discourse; neither country's actual governance practice converges on it in the same way.

China operates through top-down, centrally coordinated governance in which universities function as instruments of knowledge diplomacy. ASEAN frameworks are acknowledged but not internalized as governance reference points; the dominant channels are bilateral, and the primary normative reference is global ranking rather than regional quality standards. The dominant isomorphic mechanism is strategic normative adaptation.

Thailand operates through more fragmented governance in which national policy ambition repeatedly encounters implementation gaps. AUN-QA functions as a genuine legitimacy reference for the most internationally active institutions, but its uptake is selective and insufficiently embedded in national regulation to produce systemic compliance. The dominant isomorphic mechanism is mimetic isomorphism.

This divergence cannot be explained by reference to the supranational governance environment alone, since both countries face identical regional normative pressures. It is explained by the path-dependent governance histories, institutional capacities, and strategic orientations through which each country translates regional normative exposure into domestic policy. This is the explanatory space that the integrated MLG and institutional isomorphism framework was designed to address.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The findings carry three implications for the theoretical frameworks deployed in this study.

First, they confirm that multi-level governance theory travels productively beyond its European origins, but requires contextual adjustment when applied to Asian regional governance. The ASEAN architecture shares the Type II structural features that Hooghe and Marks (2003) identified in the EU (task-specific, overlapping, and non-hierarchical) but differs in one consequential respect: it generates normative pressure without any mechanism for monitoring compliance or imposing consequences for non-alignment. This structural softness means that national governance agency weighs far more heavily in determining outcomes than it does in the European context. The MLG framework is analytically productive here precisely because it directs attention to the multi-level structure of the governance environment, but it needs supplementing, as this study has argued, with an account of how national actors selectively engage with that environment.

Second, the findings refine the application of institutional isomorphism to state-level governance. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) framework identifies three isomorphic mechanisms, but does not theorize the conditions under which each predominates. The China–Thailand comparison suggests that the dominant mechanism is shaped by the interaction of two variables: the degree of central state coordination in domestic governance (high in China, fragmented in Thailand), and the country's structural position within the regional governance field (dialogue partner versus member state). China's

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centralized governance architecture enables strategic normative adaptation, that is, selective engagement with ASEAN frameworks in service of nationally defined goals. Thailand's fragmented architecture produces mimetic isomorphism, borrowing legitimacy templates from regional peers under conditions of governance uncertainty. This points toward a more conditional account of isomorphism than DiMaggio and Powell's original formulation offered.

Third, the study's findings speak to the wider debate on higher education regionalism in Asia examined by Cabanda et al. (2019). The parallel cooperative networks that China has constructed through BRI education cooperation, the Silk Road University Alliance, and government scholarship programs do not simply complement the ASEAN governance architecture; they constitute a competing regionalism that operates on different normative foundations and serves different governance logics. The co-existence of these two regional frameworks in Southeast Asia creates a layered governance environment that neither existing MLG accounts of ASEAN nor existing analyses of Chinese higher education strategy have adequately described.

6.2 Policy Implications

The findings also sharpen the critique of ASEAN's soft governance model. The difficulty is not that ASEAN lacks binding authority, which reflects a deliberate commitment to consensus and non-interference, but that its instruments offer no advantage to states that align in practice over those that align only in language. In this setting, regional norms are most readily absorbed by member systems that have few alternatives, while large partners with their own networks can endorse the framework at little cost. For the region as a whole, this implies that the ASEAN higher education space may develop unevenly, with deeper integration among member systems and looser, more selective ties with major external partners. The same dynamic may extend to other dialogue partners that run their own education cooperation programs, which suggests that the China and Thailand comparison captures a structural feature of the regional architecture rather than a bilateral peculiarity. The recommendations below are framed with these constraints in mind.

For ASEAN governance actors, the findings suggest that the current reliance on voluntary compliance and normative persuasion as the primary implementation mechanisms is structurally insufficient to produce the regional integration outcomes the framework seeks. If ASEAN genuinely aspires to a functioning higher education common space, mechanisms that create positive incentives for national regulatory alignment, rather than simply declaring normative expectations, will be necessary. The successful integration of AUN-QA into Thai national performance frameworks offers a limited but instructive model of how regional standards can be embedded in national governance without requiring formal treaty obligations. Within existing arrangements, ASEAN bodies could link AUN-QA assessment outcomes to eligibility for regional mobility and scholarship schemes, and the ASEAN Education Ministers' Meeting could publish periodic reports on national uptake of ACTS. Neither step requires new treaty commitments, and both rely on bodies that already exist.

For Chinese policymakers, the findings suggest that the current pattern of engagement with ASEAN higher education frameworks, with selective endorsement at the ministerial level and parallel operation at the institutional level, carries reputational risks that are not always accounted for in BRI education cooperation planning. As Chou and Ravinet (2017) observed, the legitimacy of regional governance frameworks depends partly on the perception that major actors engage with them in good faith. A China that consistently pursues bilateral channels while nominally endorsing multilateral ones may find its regional educational influence less durable than the scale of its investment would suggest. A modest step compatible with current administrative arrangements would be for education authorities

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to recognize AUN-QA outcomes when approving joint programs with ASEAN partner universities, which would signal engagement with the regional framework without altering the structure of BRI cooperation.

For Thailand, the persistent gap between policy ambition and implementation capacity identified at both the national and institutional levels points to a governance challenge that cannot be resolved by further structural reorganization alone. The MHESI reform created new institutional architecture, but the findings suggest that the binding constraint is not structural fragmentation per se but the absence of regulatory instruments that would translate national internationalization objectives into institutional incentives. Specifically, integrating ACTS into national credit recognition regulation, a technically feasible step, would create the systemic incentive for institutional engagement that currently depends on voluntary initiative. Because MHESI already monitors AUN-QA participation as a performance indicator, a comparable indicator for ACTS-based credit transfer could be added to existing reporting requirements without new legislation, and linking part of the performance-based funding introduced in the MHESI era to such indicators would give universities an incentive that does not currently exist.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined how China and Thailand govern the internationalization of their higher education systems in relation to the ASEAN regional framework, drawing on multi-level governance theory and institutional isomorphism as complementary analytical tools. The central finding is that both countries formally endorse ASEAN higher education governance frameworks while operating through governance logics that are substantively and structurally different.

China's governance of internationalization is centrally coordinated, strategically oriented, and calibrated primarily against global benchmarks rather than regional standards. Its engagement with ASEAN mechanisms is real but selective: acknowledged in ministerial discourse while bypassed in operational practice by bilateral BRI channels that serve national strategic priorities more directly. The dominant isomorphic mechanism is strategic normative adaptation.

Thailand's governance is more directly engaged with ASEAN frameworks, particularly AUN-QA, which functions as a genuine legitimacy reference for its most internationally active institutions. But the depth of this engagement is constrained by governance fragmentation, institutional path dependency, and the absence of national regulatory instruments that would embed regional standards systematically. The dominant isomorphic mechanism is mimetic isomorphism.

The divergence between these two cases cannot be explained by reference to the supranational governance environment alone, since both countries are exposed to the same regional normative pressures. It is explained by the path-dependent governance architectures, institutional capacities, and strategic orientations through which each country translates regional normative exposure into domestic policy. This finding has implications beyond the China–Thailand dyad: it suggests that ASEAN's governance model, precisely because it relies on normative persuasion rather than binding obligation, systematically advantages large, strategically coherent actors whose governance logics differ from the regional framework's integrationist intent.

The limitations noted in Sections 3.5 and 4.4 point to three directions for future research. First, because the institutional analysis rests on three leading universities per country, studies that include provincial, private, and vocational institutions are needed to test whether the national logics identified here hold across each sector. Second, because the framework treats the ASEAN field as more bounded than it is in practice, comparative work extending the analysis to other member states, particularly

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Vietnam and Indonesia, whose positions within the China–ASEAN educational relationship resemble Thailand's but with different institutional histories, would test how far the mechanisms identified here can be generalized. Third, because the evidence is documentary, interview and observational research with policymakers and university staff, ideally across successive policy cycles, would show whether the gap between stated alignment and actual practice observed in the documents also holds in implementation.

Beyond these findings, the study contributes to comparative higher education research in two ways. It shows that multi-level governance and institutional isomorphism are more useful together than apart when regional governance is soft: the first locates where norms are set and where they are filtered, and the second explains why the same norms produce different responses. It also treats a state's position in the regional field as a condition that shapes which isomorphic mechanism predominates, offering a conditional account of isomorphism that can be tested in other regional settings where non-binding frameworks coexist with powerful external partners.

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