

# A Comparative Analysis of Governance Mechanisms and Quality Assurance in Transnational Higher Education: The Cases of China and Vietnam

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study conducts a systematic comparative review of governance and quality assurance in transnational higher education in China and Vietnam. Drawing on 55 Scopus-indexed articles and following PRISMA guidelines, the analysis employs a three-level applied policy framework (macro, meso, micro) to synthesise how both countries, as East Asian developmental states, regulate cross-border education. The findings reveal a marked divergence in theoretical orientations and governance models. Chinese scholarship, reflecting a “Strategic Macro Governance” model, relies heavily on macro-organisational theories-particularly Institutional Logic and Bourdieu’s field concepts-to explain state sovereignty and the regulation of knowledge flows. In contrast, research on Vietnam, indicative of a “Centralised Operational” model, predominantly focuses on meso-level internal quality assurance mechanisms and micro-level issues such as academic staffing. Both countries confront a “double barrier” of English-Medium Instruction, where students must simultaneously cope with language demands and disciplinary content within Confucian learning cultures. The review identifies a theoretical opportunity to transfer robust macro-organisational frameworks developed in the Chinese context to deepen policy governance analysis in Vietnam, thereby informing more strategic and transparent transnational higher education governance in emerging economies.*

**KEYWORDS:** Transnational higher education; higher education governance; quality assurance; institutional logic; China and Vietnam

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of intensified globalization, transnational higher education (TNHE) has emerged as a prominent mechanism for enhancing national competitiveness and expanding access to international knowledge (Yang, 2023). TNHE encompasses diverse models such as joint programs, dual-degree programs, and international branch campuses (IBCs), all of which have experienced rapid expansion worldwide (Yang, 2023). China has become the largest host country for TNHE institutions and programs globally, with the number of transnational degree programs rising from 30 in 2003 to 885 by 2023, reflecting the strategic importance of TNHE in national education and development policies (Huang, 2023). Vietnam has also recognised the internationalisation of

higher education as a key strategy for integration into the global economy, especially since the Đổi Mới reforms in 1986 (Ryu & Nguyen, 2021). The country mainly develops joint-training programs to respond to the demand for high-quality higher education, with 408 international programs enrolling more than 10,000 students annually by 2021 (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Luong *et al.*, 2023).

Existing reviews of TNHE have primarily mapped global or region-specific trends, often focusing on Western-centric models or single-country cases, such as China or Vietnam alone (Huang, 2023; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Yang, 2023). However, there remains a theoretical and empirical gap in understanding how divergent state strategies within East Asian developmental states shape governance and quality assurance (QA) in a comparative perspective (Jarvis &

Mok, 2019). China and Vietnam are frequently categorised as East Asian developmental states because the central government plays a strategic role in directing educational flows to serve national interests and broader developmental goals (Jarvis & Mok, 2019). At the same time, the rapid expansion and diversification of TNHE generate complex challenges concerning governance, QA, and national sovereignty, particularly regarding the regulation of foreign providers and the protection of ideological and cultural values (Yang, 2023).

In China, TNHE governance is meticulously structured by strategic developmental goals designed to ensure that cross-border education serves national interests and safeguards educational sovereignty (Yang, 2023). Academic studies on TNHE in China typically engage with sophisticated macro-level and organisational theories, including analyses of institutional hybridity in cross-border joint universities (CBJUs), loose coupling between foreign and domestic partners, and Bourdieusian social network analyses that reveal the state-regulated structure of the TNHE field (Pan & Mu, 2024; Qin & Hong, 2025; Zhang *et al.*, 2024). These studies highlight the tension between Government Logic, Market Logic, and Professional Logic, which collectively generate the institutional hybridity that characterises Chinese TNHE (Qin & Hong, 2025; Xu, 2024).

Conversely, Vietnam promotes TNHE as a crucial strategy for national integration and human capital development within a relatively liberal but highly centralised legal framework (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021). Scholarly work on Vietnam predominantly addresses operational management and program-level QA, including internal quality mechanisms, curriculum alignment, and the management of Academic Self-Initiated Expatriates (ASIEs) in joint-training programs (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Tran *et al.*, 2025). Concerns about low-repute or profit-driven providers have led the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to maintain a multi-layered approval system, which is frequently criticised as cumbersome and overly reliant on procedural paperwork

(Nguyen & Shillabeer, 2013; Nhan & Nguyen, 2018). At the micro level, Vietnamese research also pays considerable attention to EMI as a “double barrier” for local students, and to the ways in which Confucian cultural norms shape classroom interaction and student positioning in TNHE contexts (Vu & Doyle, 2014; Vo *et al.*, 2022; Yao *et al.*, 2022).

Despite these rich but divergent literatures, a systematic comparative synthesis that explicitly connects the regulatory frameworks, governance models, and QA practices of China and Vietnam remains scarce. Both countries share a statist approach to higher education governance, yet they differ significantly in their theoretical orientations and management priorities. Building on this gap, this systematic comparative review is therefore conducted, from a comparative perspective, to address the following research questions: (i) What theoretical frameworks and analytical approaches are predominant in the existing literature on TNHE governance in China and Vietnam? (ii) How does the literature characterise the governance models and the role of the State in regulating TNHE development in these two contexts? and (iii) what documented challenges and strategies for internal QA and programme operations at the meso and micro levels are reported in both contexts?

In doing so, the study contributes to closing the gap between country-specific accounts and a regional comparative understanding of TNHE governance. It also explores the potential implications of adapting robust macro-organisational frameworks, which have been extensively developed in Chinese TNHE scholarship, to deepen policy governance analysis in the Vietnamese context.

**Analytical Framework:** To ensure a rigorous and consistent comparison, this review adopts an applied policy framework organised across three levels of governance (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). This multi-level framework provides an analytical lens to connect national policy logics with institutional practices and classroom-level experiences in TNHE.

- Macro-level focuses on national policies, legal frameworks, and state-led

strategic interventions that regulate cross-border educational flows and define the overall governance model for TNHE (Jarvis & Mok, 2019; Yang, 2023). At this level, concepts such as East Asian developmental state, state developmentalism, and geopolitical economy are used to explain how governments balance market opening with the protection of educational sovereignty and ideological security (Huang, 2023; Li *et al.*, 2023; Robertson & Wu, 2023).

- Meso-level examines institutional management, organisational hybridity, and internal quality assurance (IQA) systems within TNHE providers. This includes how universities design and implement IQA mechanisms, manage joint curricula, and negotiate the distribution of authority and resources between foreign and domestic partners (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Pan & Mu, 2024; Zhang *et al.*, 2024). The analysis at this level draws on theories such as Bourdieu's field and capital, loose coupling, and "glocal" hybrid space to capture the strategic positioning of institutions under strong state influence (Hasanen, 2020; Vo *et al.*, 2022).

- Micro-level investigates operational practices, classroom teaching–learning dynamics, and specific human resource challenges, including EMI implementation and the management of ASIEs. Studies at this level focus on how students and academics experience and respond to the "double barrier" of EMI, the Confucian-influenced expectations of teacher authority, and bureaucratic constraints related to visas and contracts (Tran *et al.*, 2025; Vu & Doyle, 2014; Yao *et al.*, 2022). Theoretical tools such as Positioning Theory, the Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) framework, and Expectancy–Value Theory help illuminate individual agency within these constrained environments (Liu *et al.*, 2024; Shea *et al.*, 2024; Tran *et al.*, 2025).

By systematically coding 55 selected articles against this three-level framework, the review is able to identify not only the dominant theoretical approaches in each national context but also the ways in which macro-level state logics translate into meso-level institutional arrangements and micro-level teaching–learning realities.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study is situated within applied policy research, which seeks to generate practical governance insights within specific policy frameworks (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). It adopts a Systematic Comparative Review design to synthesise and compare governance models on TNHE governance and quality assurance in China and Vietnam. A systematic review is appropriate because it offers a transparent and replicable approach to mapping the state of knowledge, goes beyond narrative description, and allows the identification of theoretical, methodological, and empirical gaps in a structured manner (Snyder, 2019).

Data collection followed the PRISMA guidelines to ensure rigour and transparency in the identification, screening, and inclusion of studies (Moher *et al.*, 2009). The Scopus database was selected as the primary source because it indexes a wide range of international peer-reviewed journals and is commonly used in higher education research. The search strategy employed the following keywords and Boolean operators: ("transnational higher education" OR "TNHE" OR "cross-border education" OR "Sino-foreign cooperation" OR "joint-training") AND ("China" OR "Vietnam") AND ("governance" OR "quality assurance"). The initial search returned 375 records. After removing duplicates, titles and abstracts were screened to identify studies with a substantive focus on TNHE governance, regulatory frameworks, or QA in China and/or Vietnam. This screening phase reduced the pool to 162 articles, which were then subjected to full text review.

The inclusion criteria required that studies: (i) were written in English; (ii) were published in peer-reviewed journals between 2000 and 2024; and (iii) explicitly addressed issues of TNHE governance, legal or regulatory frameworks, or QA mechanisms in relation to China and/or Vietnam. Exclusion criteria removed studies that: (i) discussed internationalisation or student mobility in general without a cross-border program governance focus; (ii) focused solely on classroom pedagogy or teaching innovation

without linking to institutional or policy-level governance; or (iii) dealt only with domestic higher education reforms unrelated to TNHE. Applying these criteria yielded a final sample of 55 articles, including 38 studies on China and 17 on Vietnam.

Data analysis employed Thematic Analysis within a framework analysis approach, which is particularly suitable for applied policy research where predefined analytical categories are combined with inductive coding (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). First, all 55 articles were coded deductively according to the three governance levels in the analytical framework: macro (state policies and legal frameworks), meso (institutional management and IQA), and micro (operational practices, staffing, and student experiences). Second, inductive thematic coding was conducted to identify recurrent patterns such as institutional hybridity, state developmentalism, data-driven governance, glocal hybrid spaces, EMI as a “double barrier”, and the management of ASIEs (Hasanen, 2020; Liu & Dai, 2025; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Tran *et al.*, 2025; Vu & Doyle, 2014; Yao *et al.*, 2022).

This two stage coding allowed the review to move beyond descriptive summarisation towards a comparative synthesis of governance models and quality assurance practices in the two countries. In particular, it enabled the identification of

China’s “Strategic Macro Governance” model, characterised by strong macro-organisational theorisation and tight regulatory control, and Vietnam’s “Centralised Operational” model, which emphasises programlevel QA and administrative procedures. At the same time, the framework analysis made it possible to trace how macro-level state logics shape meso-level IQA arrangements and micro-level teaching–learning and staffing dynamics, especially in relation to EMI and Confucian-influenced classroom cultures.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1. Theoretical Analysis of TNHE Governance: Key Frameworks

The comparative synthesis of 55 selected articles reveals that TNHE governance in China and Vietnam has gradually moved from descriptive policy accounts towards the application of more sophisticated theoretical frameworks. These frameworks illuminate how institutions and states negotiate power, resources, and identities within strongly state-influenced environments. As summarised in Table 1, Chinese studies (n = 38) predominantly mobilise macro-organisational and institutional theories, whereas Vietnamese studies (n = 17) lean toward meso and microlevel frameworks focusing on language, pedagogy, and human resource management.

Table 1: Distribution of Theoretical Frameworks in Reviewed Studies (n=55)

Governance Level	Theoretical Framework	Countries	Representative Studies	Frequency
Macro-level	Institutional Logic Theory	China	Qin & Hong (2025); Xu (2024); Mok (2021); Yang (2023)	12
	State Developmentalism	China, Vietnam	Jarvis & Mok (2019); Li et al. (2024); Liu D. (2025)	9
	Globalisation Theory	China	Huang (2023); Dai et al. (2020)	5
	Geo-political Economy	China	Robertson & Wu (2023)	2
Meso-level	Bourdieu’s Theory	China	Pan & Mu (2024); Yu (2021); Zhang et al. (2024)	8
	Loose Coupling Theory	China	Zhang et al. (2024)	2
	Paradox Theory	China	De Matos & Cunha (2022)	1
	“Glocal” Hybrid Space	Vietnam	Hasanen (2020)	2

Governance Level	Theoretical Framework	Countries	Representative Studies	Frequency
	ROAD-MAPPING Framework	Vietnam	Vo et al. (2022);	1
Micro-level	Positioning Theory	Vietnam	Vu & Doyle (2014); Shea et al. (2024)	6
	AMO Framework	Vietnam	Tran et al. (2025)	3
	Expectancy-Value Theory	China	Liu et al. (2023)	2
	Activity Theory	China	Liu D. (2025)	1
	Critical Pedagogy	China	Zeng, X. (2023)	1

**3.1.1. Macro- and Meso-level Theories in the Chinese Context (n=38)**

Analysis of the 38 studies on China indicates a heavy reliance on macro-organisational theories to explain how TNHE institutions operate under strong state steering. Institutional Logic Theory is the dominant analytical tool, used in 12 studies to capture the complex interplay between state sovereignty and market expansion in cross-border joint universities (Qin & Hong, 2025; Xu, 2024). This body of work conceptualises organisational behaviour as shaped by multiple, coexisting institutional orders, typically framed as Government Logic, Market Logic, and Professional Logic. Government Logic emphasises the protection of educational sovereignty and social stability, Market Logic treats education as a quasi-commercial service, and Professional Logic prioritises academic norms and long-term educational integrity (Qin & Hong, 2025; Xu, 2024). The tension and partial alignment among these three logics give rise to institutional hybridity, which has been identified as a defining characteristic of Chinese TNHE.

This institutional hybridity is further clarified through studies that employ Loose Coupling Theory at the meso level. These studies show that curricula, assessment practices, and management procedures are often flexibly adjusted to accommodate regulatory constraints and cultural differences between foreign and domestic partners (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Such loose coupling allows institutions to symbolically comply with state regulations while selectively adopting foreign practices, thereby maintaining both legitimacy and operational flexibility in a

tightly regulated policy environment (Zhang *et al.*, 2024).

Bourdieu’s theory, particularly the concepts of field, capital, and habitus, is used in eight Chinese studies to analyse the strategic positioning and competition of universities within a state-regulated TNHE space (Pan & Mu, 2024; Yu, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Bourdieusian social network analyses of Sino–foreign partnerships map the TNHE “field” into distinct poles—academically oriented, market-oriented, and state-regulated—showing how different forms of capital (academic prestige, economic resources, and political legitimacy) structure partnership configurations (Pan & Mu, 2024). Foreign universities with substantial academic and economic capital tend to pursue more cautious and academically oriented collaborations, including selective recruitment through national entrance examinations, which reinforces a homophily effect among highranking partners (Pan & Mu, 2024). These analyses underscore the determining role of the Chinese state in shaping the rules of the game in the TNHE field, even when market actors appear to be operating transnationally.

In addition, several studies adopt a bottom-up perspective by applying Cumulative (Dis)advantage Theory to newly established universities in rapidly developing regions. These works show how emerging institutions strategically use transnational joint doctoral programs (JDPs) to circumvent limitations in domestic degree recognition and to accelerate their accumulation of academic capital, reputation, and research capacity (Ruan & Yu,

2024). By leveraging CBJUs and JDPs, such institutions seek to break out of peripheral positions in the national higher education field, thereby generating a self-reinforcing cycle of advantage that further deepens the hierarchical structure of the sector (Ruan & Yu, 2024).

Taken together, these Chinese studies demonstrate that macro-organisational theories are not used in isolation but are combined to build a nuanced picture of institutional hybridity under strong state control. Theoretical work on Institutional Logic, loose coupling, Bourdieusian field, and cumulative (dis)advantage collectively explains how TNHE organisations manoeuvre between state, market, and professional demands while operating within a regulatory framework that simultaneously opens and constrains cross-border educational flows.

### 3.1.2. Meso- and Micro-level Frameworks in Vietnam (n = 17)

In contrast to Chinese literature, the 17 studies on Vietnam predominantly employ meso and microlevel frameworks that focus on language policy, pedagogy, and personnel management rather than macro-organisational theorisation. Positioning Theory is prominently used in five studies to explore how Vietnamese students and teachers negotiate their identities and roles in TNHE classrooms (Vu & Doyle, 2014; Shea *et al.*, 2024). These studies describe how students initially position foreign teachers as “uncaring” or overly demanding due to unfamiliar teaching styles, heavy workloads, and English-medium assessment, but gradually engage in agentic self-repositioning to meet higher academic expectations (Vu & Doyle, 2014). This process of repositioning is deeply embedded in a Confucian cultural context that traditionally privileges teacher authority and textbook knowledge, thereby intensifying the tension between imported learner-centred pedagogies and local expectations of didactic instruction (Vo *et al.*, 2022; Vu & Doyle, 2014).

A second cluster of Vietnamese studies conceptualises TNHE as a “glocal” hybrid space, where global education models are reinterpreted and renegotiated through national interests

and local institutional conditions (Hasanen, 2020; Vo *et al.*, 2022). Case studies of Finnish–Vietnamese and English-medium programs show that TNHE is not simply an external imposition from foreign universities, but rather a dynamic process in which curricula, language policies, and classroom practices are adapted to fit local constraints, labour market demands, and cultural expectations (Hasanen, 2020; Vo *et al.*, 2022). Within this glocal space, EMI functions as a “double barrier”: students must cope simultaneously with disciplinary content and foreign language demands, while lecturers themselves often operate with varying levels of English proficiency and pedagogical training for EMI (Yao *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding academic human resource management, three Vietnamese studies extend the Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) framework to analyse the work and performance of ASIEs in TNHE programs (Tran *et al.*, 2025). These studies classify ASIEs as critical actors at the micro level of governance, highlighting how their effectiveness is constrained by bureaucratic hurdles related to visas, work permits, and contract renewals, as well as by limited institutional support for career development (Tran *et al.*, 2025). The AMO-based analyses suggest that without appropriate opportunities and motivational structures, even highly qualified expatriate academics struggle to contribute fully to program quality, which in turn undermines the intended benefits of TNHE for local institutions.

Overall, the Vietnamese literature demonstrates a strong empirical and operational focus, concentrating on how individuals and institutions navigate everyday challenges in TNHE implementation rather than constructing macro-organisational models of state control. This contrast with the Chinese scholarship points to a significant theoretical gap: while China has developed a robust set of macro-organisational frameworks for analysing TNHE governance, Vietnamese studies remain anchored in meso- and microlevel analyses of EMI, pedagogy, and staffing. The review therefore identifies a promising opportunity to adapt and test Chinese macro-organisational frameworks in the

Vietnamese context, potentially enriching policy governance analysis beyond descriptive accounts of administrative procedures and operational constraints.

### 3.2. Macro Policies and Legal Frameworks: The Role of The State

The synthesis of 55 selected articles demonstrates that the state's role at the macro level is pivotal to understanding TNHE trajectories in both China and Vietnam. Although Vietnam is geographically located in Southeast Asia, the reviewed literature frequently categorises both countries within an "East Asian developmental state" model, in which higher education governance follows a statist approach with strategic intervention to control cross-border educational flows (Jarvis & Mok, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2023; Pan & Mu, 2024). Within this shared model, however, the 38 China-focused studies and 17 Vietnam-focused studies reveal notable differences in the modes of intervention, degrees of control, and policy priorities.

#### 3.2.1. China: Strategic Macro Governance and Protection of Educational Sovereignty (n=38)

Across the 38 studies on China, a consistent "Strategic Macro Governance" model emerges, in which the central state utilises a hierarchical legal framework to steer TNHE in line with national development goals and the safeguarding of ideological and educational sovereignty (Li *et al.*, 2023; Yang, 2023). The regulatory framework has shifted from treating TNHE as a mere supplement to the domestic system to viewing it as a key instrument of national modernisation and softpower projection (He & Wilkins, 2019; Yang, 2023). The state acts as the ultimate approval authority, constraining the types of knowledge flows that can legitimately enter the system and prioritising disciplines that support technological and economic development, particularly STEM fields, while marginalising the social sciences and humanities (Li *et al.*, 2023; Yang, 2023).

The reviewed studies show that this strategic macro governance is operationalised through specific regulatory mandates. Foreign institutions are required to collaborate exclusively with approved Chinese partners, and TNHE projects

are typically mandated to operate as non-profit entities, with at least half of the governing board members holding Chinese citizenship (Li *et al.*, 2023). Such requirements embody a cautious stance: the state encourages the importation of "practical" foreign knowledge and technologies while actively working to prevent what are perceived as undesirable Western ideological influences (Li *et al.*, 2023; Yang, 2023).

Synthesis of empirical studies indicates that this strategic intervention is evident in three main respects:

1. *Orientation and geographical distribution:* The expansion and spatial distribution of TNHE are guided not only by market demand but also by state developmental and geopolitical objectives (Li *et al.*, 2023; Pan & Mu, 2024). Although policy documents often promote TNHE development in less-developed inland regions such as Central and Western China, the majority of programmes remain concentrated in economically advanced coastal provinces like Shanghai, Beijing, and Jiangsu, where both market forces and existing academic capital are strongest (Li *et al.*, 2023; Pan & Mu, 2024). This pattern reflects a tension between state aspirations for balanced regional development and the persistent gravitational pull of Market Logic in elite urban centres (Li *et al.*, 2023; Mok, 2021).

2. *Control of Knowledge Sources and Disciplines:* The reviewed literature indicates that the government's final approval authority results in a strong orientation towards applied and STEM-related fields (e.g. engineering, management), while marginalising the social sciences and humanities (Li *et al.*, 2023; Yang, 2023). This selective emphasis reflects broader national priorities concerning economic upgrading, technological advancement, and the tighter regulation of ideologically sensitive disciplines.

3. *Value Misalignment:* A recurrent theme in Chinese TNHE research is the mismatch between the State's construction of TNHE as a public good aimed at long-term human capital accumulation and national competitiveness, and the motivations of many universities and local governments, which often prioritise rapid enrolment growth,

revenue generation, and branding (Li *et al.*, 2023; Mok, 2021). This misalignment complicates governance, as institutions must navigate between compliance with state control and responsiveness to market opportunities, often resulting in institutional hybridity and complex accountability arrangements.

Overall, the Chinese case illustrates a sophisticated macro-governance regime that combines tight regulatory control with selective opening, seeking to manage TNHE simultaneously as an economic resource and as a sensitive site of ideological negotiation (He & Wilkins, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2023; Yang, 2023).

### 3.2.2. Vietnam: Human Capital Orientation and Centralized Legal Framework (n=17)

In Vietnam, the 17 reviewed studies portray a distinct “Human Capital Orientation,” in which TNHE is framed primarily as a vehicle for supplying skilled labour to a socialist-oriented market economy rather than as a tool for ideological competition (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Ziguras & Pham, 2014). Studies note that following the Đổi Mới reforms, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been encouraged to internationalise in order to improve graduate employability and meet the needs of a growing non-state sector, especially in major economic hubs (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016; Vo *et al.*, 2022). Within this policy discourse, TNHE is expected to deliver “work-ready” human capital and to compensate for perceived weaknesses in domestic provision.

The review finds that Vietnam has adopted a moderately liberal regulatory framework that formally permits a range of foreign programs, but the actual control mechanisms implemented by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) remain highly centralised and multilayered (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). Institutions are required to undergo accreditation and obtain MOET approval before launching TNHE programs, and they must regularly report on program operations and quality indicators (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). However, seven studies critically note that this system relies heavily on procedural paperwork and ex ante approval rather than sustained, field-based monitoring of actual educational quality

(Nguyen & Shillabeer, 2013; Nhan & Nguyen, 2018). This administrative vulnerability creates space for less reputable providers to exploit regulatory gaps and profit from TNHE under a largely compliance-oriented regime (Nhan & Nguyen, 2018; Nguyen & Shillabeer, 2013).

Research highlights that, similar to China, TNHE in Vietnam is unevenly distributed, with a high concentration in major urban and economic centres such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi (Ziguras & Pham, 2014). Empirical evidence shows that student participation rates in TNHE programs in Ho Chi Minh City are significantly higher than the national average, raising concerns about regional equity in access to high-quality international programs (Ziguras & Pham, 2014). Despite policy rhetoric about improving opportunities in less-developed regions, Market Logic and local capacity constraints continue to channel most TNHE activities into already advantaged areas.

Taken together, the Vietnamese studies depict a macro-governance model that is centralised and approval-driven but less theoretically elaborated than the Chinese case. The state emphasises human capital development and formal regulatory control, yet faces persistent challenges related to administrative overload, limited managerial expertise, and the risk of quality dilution in a rapidly expanding TNHE market (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). While both China and Vietnam use TNHE as an instrument for development and international positioning, the Chinese literature develops a far more explicit macro-organisational account of state power, whereas the Vietnamese literature tends to foreground operational constraints and procedural complexity at the implementation level.

### 3.3. Quality Assurance and Meso-level Management

The reviewed literature indicates that mesolevel (institutional) management and quality assurance are critical to maintaining academic integrity and achieving the human capital development goals associated with TNHE in both China and Vietnam (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). The literature consistently shows that macrolevel state regulation alone is insufficient; institutions must develop detailed internal quality assurance

(IQA) frameworks that encompass curriculum design, staffing, assessment, and language-of-instruction policies. While this section primarily focuses on mesolevel institutional practices, it also incorporates microlevel operational factors such as classroom dynamics, EMI implementation, and academic staffing, which directly shape perceived quality.

### 3.3.1. Quality Management and Curriculum (meso level)

In Vietnam, eight studies emphasise that joint-training programmes are required to establish comprehensive IQA mechanisms covering administrative organisation, information transparency, formal curriculum review procedures, teaching and learning quality assessment, and student support services (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). Bestpractice guidelines stress that admission requirements and course content should be equivalent to those of the originating institution, and that clear, accessible information must be provided to students and stakeholders to build trust in the quality of TNHE offerings (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). Research conceptualising TNHE as a “glocal” hybrid space and employing the ROADMAPPING framework further shows how Vietnamese institutions renegotiate imported curricula and EMI policies in order to align with local institutional conditions, labour market expectations, and students’ linguistic and cultural resources (Hasanen, 2020; Vo *et al.*, 2022).

In China, the literature documents a transition from a phase of rapid quantitative expansion to a phase where quality enhancement has become a central concern (Huang, 2023). However, several studies highlight the risks associated with data-driven quality governance, where administrators rely heavily on numerical indicators, rankings, and performance metrics in decision-making (Liu & Dai, 2025). Analyses using Bourdieu’s theory and Institutional Logic at the meso level indicate that this emphasis on quantitative targets can promote organisational performativity while obscuring substantive educational goals and deeper questions of academic quality (Pan & Mu, 2024; Qin & Hong, 2025; Xu, 2024).

With regard to curriculum, studies drawing on Loose Coupling Theory reveal a persistent

challenge: the wholesale importation of foreign curricula without sufficient adaptation to local regulatory, cultural, and labour market contexts (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Such unmodified curriculum transfer often limits effective knowledge exchange and restricts organisational learning on the part of host institutions, which may become dependent on foreign partners’ materials and assessment systems (Li *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Both Chinese and Vietnamese cases therefore underscore the need for more context-sensitive curriculum integration, where joint design and iterative review replace oneway “copying” of programmes from abroad.

### 3.3.2. Academic Staffing and Language of Instruction (Micro within Meso)

Recurring themes in the reviewed dataset highlight the management of academic staff—particularly foreign faculty and Academic Self-Initiated Expatriates - and the implementation of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) as central components of meso-level QA in TNHE. In the Vietnamese context, studies utilising the Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) framework demonstrate that, although ASIEs’ academic qualifications are highly valued, their effectiveness is frequently constrained by bureaucratic obstacles related to visas, work permits, and contract renewals, as well as by limited institutional support for career progression (Tran *et al.*, 2025). The analysis suggests that these constraints undermine both motivation and opportunity, making it difficult for institutions to retain high-quality expatriate staff and to capitalise fully on their expertise in curriculum and pedagogy (Tran *et al.*, 2025).

Analysis of meso-level studies identifies the pervasive use of EMI as a defining feature of TNHE in both countries, distinctively characterised by Yao *et al.* (2022) as a “double barrier” for local students. The literature indicates that learners must simultaneously cope with the cognitive demands of disciplinary content and the linguistic demands of English, while lecturers themselves may possess uneven English proficiency and limited training in EMI

pedagogy (Yao *et al.*, 2022). In the Vietnamese context, scholars argue that this linguistic and pedagogical tension is amplified by Confucian cultural norms, which traditionally privilege the authority of the teacher and the textbook, thereby creating friction with imported learner-centred approaches (Vo *et al.*, 2022; Vu & Doyle, 2014). Qualitative findings reveal that students' initial response to this dissonance is often to position foreign teachers as “uncaring” or overly demanding; however, over time, many engage in proactive self-repositioning to adapt to higher academic expectations and interactive classroom norms (Vu & Doyle, 2014; Vo *et al.*, 2022).

In China, the reviewed literature indicates that foreign academics and returnee scholars work within a complex environment where bureaucratic and geopolitical factors influence job satisfaction and long-term commitment (Li *et al.*, 2023). A recurring point of friction is the expectation in some TNHE programs for near-universal EMI, which may clash with local classroom realities and students' language competencies, thereby generating frustration for both staff and learners (Xu, 2024). To mitigate these challenges, several studies recommend context-sensitive language support measures, such as sustained English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, the use of bilingual teaching assistants, and flexible language-of-assessment policies at higher degree levels, including debates around allowing thesis defence in the local language in some transnational doctoral programs (Xu, 2024; Yao *et al.*, 2022).

Overall, the findings suggest that ensuring quality at the institutional and operational levels requires more than compliance with external standards or numerical performance indicators. Effective QA in TNHE depends on curriculum adaptation, coherent IQA systems, context-appropriate staffing policies, and careful management of EMI within Confucian-influenced learning cultures, so that local students can engage meaningfully with international curricula rather than merely coping with them as an additional linguistic and cultural burden (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Vo *et al.*, 2022; Yao *et al.*, 2022).

#### 4. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This systematic comparative review has synthesised governance mechanisms and QA practices in TNHE in China and Vietnam by analysing 55 Scopus-indexed articles through a three-level analytical framework (macro, meso, micro). The findings confirm that both countries share core features of East Asian developmental states, where the state plays a central role in steering cross-border education, but they follow distinct governance trajectories and research traditions (Jarvis & Mok, 2019). China is characterised by a “Strategic Macro Governance” model that uses a hierarchical legal framework and selective approval mechanisms to control knowledge flows and safeguard educational sovereignty, whereas Vietnam exhibits a “Centralised Operational” model that focuses more on program level QA, administrative procedures, and human capital formation (Li *et al.*, 2023; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Yang, 2023). At the meso and micro levels, both systems confront quality challenges in curriculum integration, staff management, and the “double barrier” of English-Medium Instruction, which is further complicated in Vietnam by Confucian-influenced classroom cultures (Vo *et al.*, 2022; Vu & Doyle, 2014; Yao *et al.*, 2022).

#### Theoretical Contributions

The review makes three main theoretical contributions that directly reflect the patterns identified in the 55 studies. First, it systematically maps the theoretical landscape of TNHE governance research, showing that Chinese scholarship is heavily grounded in macro-organisational frameworks—Institutional Logic, Bourdieu's field and capital, state developmentalism, and globalisation/geopolitical economy—to analyse how state, market, and professional logics interact in cross-border joint universities (Huang, 2023; Li *et al.*, 2023; Pan & Mu, 2024; Qin & Hong, 2025; Robertson & Wu, 2023; Xu, 2024). These frameworks clarify the phenomenon of institutional hybridity, where institutions simultaneously respond to state imperatives, market incentives, and academic norms (Pan & Mu, 2024; Qin & Hong, 2025). Second, it demonstrates that Vietnamese research is more concentrated at the meso and micro levels, using Positioning Theory, “glocal”

hybrid space, the ROADMAPPING framework, AMO, and EMI-related approaches to examine classroom dynamics, student agency, and the management of ASIEs (Hasanen, 2020; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Tran *et al.*, 2025; Vo *et al.*, 2022; Vu & Doyle, 2014). Third, by juxtaposing these theoretical profiles, the review identifies a clear conceptual opportunity: adapting robust macro-organisational frameworks from Chinese TNHE scholarship to enrich and deepen Vietnamese analyses of state–market–university relations, thus moving beyond predominantly descriptive accounts of administrative procedures (Pan & Mu, 2024; Qin & Hong, 2025).

### **Policy Implications**

The empirical synthesis in Sections 3.2 and 3.3 suggests differentiated but complementary policy implications. For China, the key challenge is to balance strong macrolevel control and data-driven governance with a deeper concern for substantive academic quality. Current practices that prioritise numerical indicators, rankings, and performance targets risk reinforcing organisational performativity and hierarchies in the TNHE field, while obscuring questions of learning outcomes, disciplinary breadth, and the value of social sciences (Huang, 2023; Liu & Dai, 2025; Pan & Mu, 2024). Policymakers should therefore reassess the use of quantitative metrics and encourage evaluation mechanisms that better capture institutional hybridity and educational substance, not only compliance and output.

For Vietnam, the findings highlight the urgency of streamlining centralised approval and accreditation mechanisms that are currently perceived as overly bureaucratic, document-heavy, and vulnerable to profit-driven providers (Nguyen & Shillabeer, 2013; Nhan & Nguyen, 2018). Strengthening managerial capacity at institutional level, improving field-based monitoring, and addressing regional inequities in TNHE access—especially between major cities and less-developed provinces—should be central policy priorities (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016; Ziguras & Pham, 2014). For both countries, the review underscores that effective TNHE governance and QA require context-sensitive EMI and staffing policies, including sustained English for

Specific Purposes support, culturally informed HR strategies for ASIEs, and flexible language-of-assessment practices, so that TNHE becomes an enabling rather than exclusionary mechanism for local students (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Tran *et al.*, 2025; Vo *et al.*, 2022; Yao *et al.*, 2022).

### **Study Limitations**

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged to align clearly with the scope of the evidence. First, the review is restricted to Scopus-indexed, English-language, publications, which may exclude relevant studies published in Chinese and Vietnamese or in nonindexed local journals, potentially narrowing the range of perspectives captured (Huang, 2023; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021). Second, there is an imbalance in country coverage, with 38 studies on China and 17 on Vietnam, reflecting different stages of TNHE development and research maturity and limiting strict symmetry in comparison (Li *et al.*, 2023; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). Third, as a literature-based synthesis, the review depends on the quality and reporting practices of the original studies and cannot provide primary empirical validation of the governance models or the proposed theoretical transfers.

### **Directions for Future Research**

In light of these limitations, several avenues for future research emerge directly from the gaps identified in the reviewed literature. Empirically, there is a strong need for multisite, comparative case studies that explicitly apply macro-organisational frameworks such as Institutional Logic and Bourdieusian field theory to Vietnamese TNHE, in order to test their explanatory power beyond the Chinese context and to generate more nuanced accounts of institutional hybridity under different regulatory regimes (Pan & Mu, 2024; Qin & Hong, 2025). Methodologically, mixed-methods designs that combine policy analysis, institutional ethnography, and longitudinal tracking of students and staff would offer richer insights into how macrolevel state logics are translated into mesolevel IQA practices and microlevel classroom experiences, particularly in EMI settings (Hasanen, 2020; Vo *et al.*, 2022; Yao *et al.*, 2022). Conceptually, further work is needed to theorise Confucian heritage culture, EMI, and institutional hybridity together,

examining how norms around teacher authority, assessment, and “face” interact with imported governance and QA models in both China and Vietnam (Vu & Doyle, 2014; Yao *et al.*, 2022). Finally, future reviews should widen the evidence base by incorporating non-English and non-Scopus sources, so as to capture indigenous debates and local policy discourses that are not visible in international databases, thereby

offering a more comprehensive and locally grounded understanding of TNHE governance in the region (Jarvis & Mok, 2019; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021).

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