

The Three Types of China Student Mobility into Southeast Asia

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1. **Title: The Three Tye of China Student Mobility into Southeast Asia**
2. **Research Overview:** In this paper we present three cases to show the diversity of higher education strategies in Southeast Asia, focusing on Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. We examine the impact of these strategies on the type of China students attracted, as well as diverse intercultural international student learning.
3. **Purpose of Study:** While international students have long chosen Southeast Asian countries as study destinations, much of the scholarly discourse has drawn on global North literature to portray student mobility flows gravitating towards global cities and established international education hubs in the world. Narratives examining the diversity of student flows within the region remain less developed. In this paper, we look to Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam to analyse three modes of foreign student incorporation into higher education systems in the region. Singapore represents globally ranked higher education opportunities attempting to attract top Asian students with a common English education among local and international students. Thailand's universities adopt a neoliberal model attracting fee paying students with a focus on market demand for academic and vocational learning. Vietnam's less developed educational infrastructure pushes it to focus on language learning and cultural programmes.
4. **Research Methods:** The data for this paper is derived from a 3-year study from funded by the Singapore Ministry of Education tier 2 grant. The study focussed on the strategies of universities in selected Southeast Asian countries as well as migration decisions of mainland China students and their choices for international education. The paper covered three (Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) of the six countries (Vietnam, Malaysia and Quaxi, China) included in the study. The research covered biographic interviews with students, university officials and a short China student survey in each country. The combination of three methods, including a study of the historical paths of university and government policies allow for an understanding of the university competencies, their strategies for international education and foreign student response.
5. **Results and Discussion:** Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam represent three distinct modes which we argue can represent the international education models present in Southeast Asia. Singapore demonstrates the conventional narrative of national flagship universities playing an increasing global role, with a strong presence in higher education league tables (Collins, Ho, Ishikawa and Ma, 2016). The country shows consistent state intervention in regulating international student numbers alongside generous scholarship support, in the interest of talent attraction and developing research labour for innovation and industry. National universities are also extensively engaged in international student recruitment and curriculum development to meet international demand, while balancing national integration priorities and policy goals.

In contrast, Thailand higher education environment is beset by declining fertility and declining state higher education financial support. As a result, Thai universities have adopted inside out

(e.g. to commercialize their curricula) and outside in (the use of education agents, and the hiring of foreign sessional lecturers to teach in Chinese) market making models (Komljenovic and Robertson (2016). This quest of revenue sourcing has led to a more neoliberal environment where universities extensively market themselves to attract foreign students—particularly from China. Thai universities have been active in developing MOUs with Chinese institutions which allow for students to spend up to 2 years in Thailand for overseas exposure.

Vietnam's higher education system is in an early stage of active internationalisation and beginning to hosting a growing number of international students, particularly from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. While there is growing aspiration among institutions to transition from a nationally focused to a globally integrated model, challenges remain in uneven state funding and limited English-taught provision outside major cities. Vietnam is instead positioning itself as a regional hub for affordable, internationally recognised education through Vietnamese-language and cultural programmes, functioning as a form of soft power diplomacy. Historical and diplomatic ties have made China an increasingly important source of fee-paying student flows.

Together, the three cases present three distinct types of international student incorporation: a state-directed university strategy oriented around talent attraction and research labour development; a market-driven model in which universities innovate curricula to attract fee-paying foreign students as state support declines; and an emerging internationalisation model anchored in language training and cultural exchange, aligned with diplomatic objectives and a growing aspiration for regional partnership.

These findings suggest that student mobility in Southeast Asia is shaped less by a single globalising logic than by the interplay of state capacity, market orientation, and geopolitical positioning—dimensions that remain under-explored in existing accounts of international student mobility.

References:

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6. **Keywords:** International education, Mainland chinese student mobility, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam