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Cultural Policy Convergence in Southeast and East Asia

A Comparative Analysis of Fiscal Policy and Expenditure Priorities governing the Music Sectors of South Korea and Thailand

Topic and Research Question

"Is there evidence of convergence in cultural fiscal policy systems across Southeast and East Asia?" This thesis compares the fiscal policies and expenditure priorities governing the music industries of South Korea and Thailand to draw broader conclusions about the potential for policy convergence in the broader Southeast and East Asian region. In recent years, globalization has reshaped cultural policy landscapes, with governments increasingly adopting industry-oriented approaches that position culture as a commodifiable driver of economic growth. South Korea and Thailand were selected as comparative case studies. South Korea's government-led cultural framework has successfully transformed its music industry into a globally influential economic industry. Thailand, meanwhile, has openly expressed ambitions to likewise develop its creative industries and cultivate a "Thai Wave," making the two countries relevant cases for examining policy convergence.

State of the Art

Policy convergence is a widely studied topic across various public policy fields, including education, climate, and regional development. However, there is little research on the transfer and convergence of cultural policy elements across borders, as culture is often treated merely as a contextual factor rather than a policy domain in its own right. While some research touches on cultural development, in-depth examinations of institutional state involvement in specific art forms remain scarce. Therefore research on sectors such as music likewise remains underdeveloped. This gap is further reinforced by the Western-centric focus of public policy scholarship, which has historically concentrated on the United States and Europe, resulting in the underrepresentation of Asian cultural policy systems. Additionally, comparative research examining policy transfer and thereafter policy convergence within Asia remains limited, with existing studies frequently focusing on single-country cases instead of cross-national analyses. Moreover, the broader cultural policy frameworks of South Korea and Thailand have received uneven scholarly attention. Although South Korea's governmental approach to culture has been widely studied, analyses rarely address fiscal policy and expenditure priorities. By comparison, academic research on Thailand's cultural governance is still in its early stages.

Methodology and Approach

To assess whether cultural fiscal policy systems are converging, this thesis develops an eclectic analytical framework which in its structure is based on the policy transfer framework by Dolowitz and Marsh alongside Throsby's understanding of the cultural policy process. To establish analytical boundaries for cross-national comparison, the thesis conceptualizes the "cultural fiscal policy system" as the set of institutions, policies, and financial mechanisms through which governments allocate resources to cultural sectors deemed strategically important. In this way the vast concept of culture becomes a defined, observable and comparable policy domain.

Based on these foundations, cultural policy is compartmentalized into three core dimensions: **(1)** the policy objectives pursued, **(2)** the institutional structures responsible for implementation, and **(3)** the policy instruments used to achieve the intended outcomes. To refine the analysis further, a fiscal perspective is integrated, framing culture within a system of observable support structures created through government funding and prioritization mechanisms.

Accordingly, the defining characteristics of a country's cultural fiscal policy system are identified as the main policy priorities, the institutional and cultural parity of the "parent ministry," and the extent to which administrative responsibilities extend to affiliated agencies, including their degree of financial dependence.

Empirically, the analysis relies primarily on administrative sources such as national budget plans, expenditure reports, and financial statements. By examining relevant budget lines and fiscal policy tools directed toward the music industry, the study evaluates whether financial support exists, how resources are distributed, and what these allocations reveal about governmental priorities.

Main Facts

The economic relevance of the music industry varies significantly between South Korea and Thailand. In South Korea, the sector expanded steadily between 2017 and 2022, contributing around 0.15% to national GDP. In Thailand, by contrast, the music industry remained economically marginal, accounting for less than 0.02% of GDP.

In both countries responsibility for the music industry lies with a designated "parent ministry" positioned at the highest administrative level, providing a comparable structural foundation for cultural governance. In South Korea, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism holds strong legal and fiscal authority over the sector and integrates both traditional cultural promotion and commercially oriented industry development into its mandate. The Thai Ministry of Culture, by contrast, exercises a more indirect role, with music largely embedded within broader initiatives tied to heritage, national identity, and contemporary arts.

Additionally, South Korea maintains a consistent budgetary commitment to affiliated agencies supporting the music sector, with several institutions receiving substantial public funding between 2017 and 2024. Many of these agencies operate with varying degrees of financial autonomy, reflecting an extended administrative structure within the ministry. In Thailand, however, no affiliated agencies with an explicit music-related mandate could be identified within the Ministry's budget reports.

Results

The analysis finds only limited evidence of convergence between the cultural fiscal policy systems of the music industry of South Korea and Thailand. Although both countries assign responsibility for the music industry to a parent ministry at the highest administrative level, this structural similarity does not outweigh all other substantial differences in governance.

The analysis reveals distinct policy trajectories. South Korea treats the music industry as a strategic economic asset embedded within a broader content-industry framework and supported through targeted funding and specialized agencies. Thailand, by contrast, primarily positions music within heritage and soft-power agendas, with fiscal support remaining less visible and more indirectly structured. Therefore, South Korea actively supports the music industry as part of an economically strategic content-sector framework, whereas Thailand's approach remains more indirectly structured and embedded within traditional cultural policy domains. Taken together, the findings suggest that similarities at the institutional level do not yet translate into convergent cultural fiscal policy systems. Any emerging regional alignment therefore appears to be, if anything, at an early stage rather than being indicative of a unified model.

However, as an outlook, recent policy developments suggest that Thailand may be approaching a turning point. Strategic initiatives such as the proposed Creative Culture Promotion Act as well as plans to establish a dedicated creative-culture agency indicate a growing recognition of the music sector's economic potential and the need for stronger institutional support. Should these reforms materialize, Thailand could begin building the fiscal and administrative foundations required to develop a more internationally competitive music industry, potentially moving closer to South Korea's industry-oriented model. Yet it remains uncertain whether policymakers will fully commodify the sector or instead pursue a hybrid approach that balances global market integration with the preservation of cultural identity.

At the same time, increasing private-sector activity and emerging international partnerships suggest that the Thai music industry may evolve even in the absence of extensive state support. Whether these dynamics will foster policy transfer and contribute to broader regional convergence ultimately remains an open question, positioning the music industry as a key area for future comparative research.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at https://utheses.univie.ac.at/detail/78908/

About the Author

Holding a B.A. in Media and Communication Studies, the author has developed a strong interest in cultural policy and creative industries with a regional focus on East Asia. They aspire to pursue a career in the communications sector, ideally within a NGO setting, where they can contribute to international engagement.

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