

Exploring the Optimization Pathways for China-ASEAN Cross-Border Educational Cooperation from the Perspective of Geopolitical Relations

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Abstract: In the context of ongoing globalization and the increasingly close ties between China and ASEAN, cross-border educational cooperation has become an important vehicle for both parties to deepen educational exchanges and strengthen mutual interests. This paper provides a preliminary analysis of the current state of cross-border educational cooperation between China and ASEAN, focusing on the impact of geopolitical factors and their underlying causes. The research finds that geopolitical relations significantly influence the advancement and sustainability of cooperative projects by affecting regional stability and policy orientation. Additionally, the internal development disparities and the inadequacies of cooperation mechanisms on both sides also restrict the full realization of potential. Based on these findings, this study further proposes optimization pathways for cross-border educational cooperation aimed at deepening mutual trust, improving mechanisms, and focusing on quality.

Keywords: Geopolitical Relations; Cross-Border Education; China-ASEAN, Cooperation Pathways; Regional Cooperation

1. Introduction

Since the advent of globalization, the connections between countries have continuously strengthened, and "the dominant structure of international interaction has shifted to a relationship of 'complex interdependence'" [1]. The 2003 "Second International Forum on Trade in Educational Services" explicitly introduced the concept of "cross-border education", categorizing it into three main forms: the cross-border movement of personnel, the cross-border flow of programs, and the cross-border mobility of educational institutions.

The forum clearly discussed topics such as "the main forms and development trends of cross-border education, its relationship with national policies, the connection between cross-border education and educational service trade, and the qualification certification and quality assurance of cross-border education" [2]. As globalization deepens, China needs to strengthen its ties of interest with ASEAN through cooperative means to better exert its influence as a major power on the international stage and to promote regional stability and development. Therefore, cross-border educational cooperation between China and ASEAN member countries is particularly important.

Geopolitical relations have a certain impact on the development of cross-border education. Currently, the educational development between China and ASEAN is progressing well, with notable achievements, such as the initiatives promoted during the China-ASEAN Education Exchange Week held in Guizhou. However, there are also some challenges in the development of cross-border education between China and ASEAN, and cooperation in this area needs further enhancement. From an external perspective, the current competitive landscape among major international powers, particularly the strategic competition between the United States and China, has prompted the U.S. to adopt a series of strategies targeting China, which indirectly affects cross-border education between China and ASEAN by leading some ASEAN member countries to adopt a cautious approach to cooperation. Additionally, the actions of certain Western countries towards some ASEAN nations indirectly influence the stability of the foundational development of cross-border education between China and ASEAN. From an internal perspective, the multidimensionality within ASEAN significantly affects cross-border education, as

there are varying levels of economic development, cultural differences, and religious diversity among the member countries. Furthermore, the limitations in China's educational development, such as imbalances in educational progress across different regions and subpar teaching quality, also indirectly impact the development of cross-border education with ASEAN. Therefore, this paper analyzes the developmental challenges faced by cross-border education between China and ASEAN from a geopolitical perspective and explores optimization pathways for cross-border educational cooperation.

2. The Foundation of China-ASEAN Cross-Border Educational Cooperation under Geopolitical Relations

2.1 Advantages of Proximity in Geographic Location

China's geographical proximity to ASEAN member countries creates highly favorable conditions for educational cooperation between China and these nations. Additionally, the gradual development of transportation industries between China and ASEAN countries has facilitated educational exchanges, promoting academic collaboration and strengthening cultural and educational ties between the two sides.

2.2 Support of the Economic Foundation

China and ASEAN member countries have complementary economic and trade structures [3]. China has a vast domestic market, while ASEAN countries offer relatively inexpensive labor and abundant resources, creating a complementary and mutually reinforcing relationship. In recent years, the rapid economic development of both China and ASEAN member countries has led to increasingly close cooperation in economic matters, which in turn has facilitated exchanges in education. As China invests capital in ASEAN countries and vice versa, the educational resources of both sides have also been optimized. This not only enhances the overall economic value of both parties and promotes the extension and upgrading of industrial chains but also gradually expands the demand for talent, opening new avenues for cross-border educational cooperation. The cultivation of talent by both sides not only meets their respective economic

development needs but also contributes to regional economic growth.

2.3 The Influence of Historical Origins

China and ASEAN member countries share a long-standing tradition of friendship that spans thousands of years, with this historical legacy providing a rich cultural foundation for educational exchanges and cooperation between the two sides. For a long time, the positive traditions in the development and promotion of educational exchanges and cooperation have been maintained, and the accumulation of Chinese culture formed during this process has led to a certain degree of cultural identity and value consensus between the two parties, serving as an important basis for advancing educational exchanges and cooperation. As times change, the international landscape and geopolitical relations have undergone significant transformations; however, the tradition of educational cooperation between China and ASEAN member countries has continued to be inherited and developed, becoming an important component of mutual exchanges and cooperation between China and ASEAN member countries.

2.4 Evidence of Real Achievements

Participants in educational exchange and cooperation negotiate, communicate, mediate, collaborate, and engage in mutual compromise to meet the diverse needs and interests of their partners in pursuit of common goals [4]. Educational cooperation between China and ASEAN member countries has yielded positive results. Various educational cooperation projects have been established between China and ASEAN member countries, with a continuous increase in the number of students sent and received for study abroad. The scope and depth of educational exchanges have expanded, playing a positive role in the educational development and talent cultivation of both China and ASEAN member countries. The educational exchanges and cooperation encompass multiple aspects, including higher education, vocational education, and language training, providing students from both sides with learning opportunities and avenues for development. The mutual exchange of students also facilitates academic exchange and knowledge sharing, further enhancing the quality of exchanged students. Efforts are being

made to cultivate high-level disciplines among exchanged students, develop disciplines where China has advantages and ASEAN countries have demand, expand the scale and scope of bilateral student exchange programs, and actively explore the establishment of student exchange bases among ASEAN countries in China to create new conditions for Sino-foreign cooperative education. Additionally, through high-quality educational partners from China or by sending students in both directions, talent development projects aimed at training or exporting expert engineers are being established. There is also a concerted effort to organize and implement joint research projects among government departments, research institutions, and universities in China and ASEAN member countries. These cooperative achievements highlight the close relationship in educational cooperation between China and ASEAN member countries, while also facilitating the further development of future bilateral cross-border educational cooperation.

3. Current Status of China-ASEAN Cross-Border Educational Cooperation

Cross-border educational cooperation between China and ASEAN member countries is characterized by diversity and comprehensiveness. It encompasses collaboration across various educational programs, ranging from higher education to vocational and basic education. At the higher education level, multiple joint educational projects are currently underway, while there is corresponding cooperation in vocational education and strengthened exchanges in basic education. In December 2015, the government of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region established the "China-ASEAN Vocational Education Research Center" in partnership with Nanning Normal University, serving as an important platform for research in vocational technology between China and ASEAN, as well as an international exchange and cooperation platform for talent cultivation in vocational education. During the exchange week, China and ASEAN member countries jointly established 30 "China-ASEAN Education and Training Centers", which are distributed across 15 provinces, including Guangxi, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Fujian, and Heilongjiang, to support mutual talent and faculty exchanges and training. In August 2024, the China-ASEAN

Thousand Schools Hand-in-Hand Conference was held in Guizhou, focusing on creating a platform for cultural exchanges between China and ASEAN, promoting mutual benefits for regional development. China and ASEAN have successively initiated a program involving 1,500 schools. In December 2024, the establishment of the "Chinese + Vocational Education" Alliance further strengthened the important direction of integrating international Chinese education with vocational education development [5].

4. The Geopolitical Challenges and Causes of Cross-Border Educational Cooperation between China and ASEAN Member Countries

4.1 Challenges in Geopolitical Relations

The core of cross-border educational cooperation is "cross-border", which explores educational collaboration between sovereign states from the perspective of "international relations". The underlying logic is no longer solely based on "educational attributes", but also encompasses "public attributes". [6] The challenges posed by geopolitical relations in China-ASEAN cross-border education can be analyzed from the following dimensions:

At the strategic level, during the process of educational cooperation between China and ASEAN, it is necessary to weigh and consider each party's strategic interests. This, to some extent, limits the scope and extent of cooperation. For instance, when implementing cross-border education projects, there may be various reasons, such as the pursuit of strategic resources and competition for regional influence, that could lead to disagreements and friction between the two countries. These strategic considerations require both parties to pay closer attention to the management of their relationships during cooperation, avoiding situations where collaboration encroaches upon each other's interests, thereby constraining the development of cooperation.

At the policy level, different countries exhibit inconsistencies in their education policies and laws, which leads to difficulties in cross-border educational cooperation. This inconsistency is reflected not only in the formulation and implementation of education policies but also in the understanding and attitudes toward cross-border educational cooperation. Some countries may actively seek cooperation with

educational institutions from other countries, while others, due to specific domestic circumstances and developmental considerations, may not advocate for cross-border educational cooperation. This results in policy discrepancies that complicate communication and coordination between the parties involved in educational collaboration. Furthermore, differing initial intentions regarding educational cooperation can even affect the implementation of collaborative projects. How to achieve mutual coordination at the policy level is a challenge that both parties need to confront and resolve together.

Thirdly, at the level of educational practice, disparities in education quality standards, curriculum content, and the teaching workforce can lead to numerous practical issues in educational cooperation. For instance, differing education quality standards can result in imbalances in educational quality, and gaps in quality control can pose a series of challenges for both parties during the educational process, making education quality a significant issue that both sides must address, thereby having a substantial impact on the academic quality of the relevant students. Furthermore, differences in curriculum content can create challenges in knowledge integration for students studying across countries. Additionally, variations in teacher quality and workforce composition will directly affect teaching quality, teaching effectiveness, and the enhancement of learning quality, among other factors.

Fourthly, at the social and cultural level, differences in cultural concepts and values pose challenges to social recognition and cultural harmony in educational cooperation. Some educational philosophies, practices, or teaching methods that are popular in China may not be favored or may be difficult to implement in ASEAN countries. Cultural differences can not only hinder the normal progress of educational cooperation but can also affect the behaviors and outcomes of educational exchanges, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. Additionally, these differences can create significant barriers to language communication, resulting in inaccurate information exchange and a waste of educational resources.

4.2 A Detailed Analysis of the Main Causes

4.2.1 The impact of geopolitical relations

One of the important reasons for the high risks

associated with cross-border educational cooperation is the complex changes in geopolitical relations. Differences in strategic orientations and interactive dynamics among countries within a region lead to instability in cooperation. Additionally, regional tensions and uncertainties in the geopolitical environment contribute to the complexity of cross-border educational cooperation. Conflicts between regions, territorial disputes, or issues of political distrust can all impact the advancement of educational cooperation projects, potentially leading to their forced termination. Furthermore, changes in geopolitical relations may also result in economic shocks, affecting educational investment and resource allocation, thereby further increasing the challenges of cross-border educational cooperation.

4.2.2 The game of geopolitical interests

In educational cooperation, the competition among countries regarding educational resources, markets, and influence can sometimes affect or even hinder the development of collaboration to varying degrees. For instance, some countries may attempt to seek greater geopolitical benefits in educational partnerships, leading to a situation where certain nations perceive collaboration as a threat to their interests, resulting in a degree of protectionism and obstruction of educational resource cooperation with other countries. Furthermore, inequalities can also exist in education, such as the monopolization of teaching resources and advanced technologies by specific countries or a severe tilt in educational resources. The emergence of such conditions can exacerbate the geopolitical competition during the cooperation process, thereby hindering the depth of educational collaboration and causing certain uncertain negative impacts.

4.2.3 Differences in cultural beliefs

In collaboration, differences in educational philosophies and methods often manifest between the two parties, necessitating that both sides seek common ground while mutually respecting their cultural traditions. This, in turn, facilitates educational exchange activities. However, the deeply entrenched nature of both parties' cultural traditions and the rigidity of their educational philosophies often pose obstacles to the implementation of these exchanges, making it challenging to reach a consensus on cultural beliefs in the short term. Furthermore, cultural differences are not limited

to teaching practices, textbooks, and curriculum design; they are also deeply rooted in the thoughts and behaviors of students and teachers. This creates a pressing issue in educational cooperation: how to promote cultural integration and complementarity while maintaining the independence of each party's educational system.

5. Optimization Pathways for Cross-Border Education between China and ASEAN

Overall, under the geopolitical context, the environment for China-ASEAN cross-border educational cooperation presents new opportunities and challenges. In the process of cross-border educational cooperation, it is essential to analyze it from different levels to better develop the pathways for cross-border education.

5.1 Policy and Institutional Level

Updating and iterating on the existing educational cooperation system and governance framework is essential to enhance the contemporaneity and localization of China-ASEAN educational cooperation [7]. Strengthening communication and coordination is crucial. In the process of advancing educational cooperation between China and ASEAN, it is important to ensure a smooth alignment between China's cooperation policies and regulations and those of ASEAN, ultimately leading to a favorable policy communication situation. This will establish a solid policy foundation for China's educational cooperation with ASEAN. Additionally, establishing and improving the legal framework for cross-border educational cooperation is necessary to clarify the responsibilities, rights, and obligations of both parties, providing essential legal protection. Implementing degree and diploma recognition and simplifying visa procedures to facilitate the mobility of international students are also critical components that cannot be overlooked in terms of policy and institutional support. Furthermore, enhancing cooperation mechanisms and establishing cooperation platforms will promote the creation of more efficient operational platforms for cooperation between China and ASEAN member countries, facilitating resource exchange, information sharing, and mutual learning and assistance, thereby achieving high effectiveness and efficiency in cooperation.

5.2 Educational Practice Level

In the era of significant change, the transformation of globalization and international order has led to "limited globalization" and "decentralization", profoundly impacting cross-border education [8]. The intrinsic logic of the openness of higher vocational education between China and ASEAN lies in the expansion of global interests in the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind, the reshaping of international relations, and the promotion of individual conscious unity and the dissemination of principles of justice to enhance higher educational cooperation. Through collaborative educational programs, academic exchanges, and joint research initiatives, the interaction and communication between higher education institutions in China and ASEAN member countries are strengthened, jointly improving the quality of talent cultivation [9]. The mutual recognition of credits and degree alignment between China and ASEAN member countries provides students with greater convenience for studying and working within the region. Such educational collaborative practices not only facilitate the exchange and cooperation between higher education institutions on both sides but also contribute to enhancing educational quality and cultivating more talents with international perspectives capable of cross-cultural communication.

Strengthening the linkage of vocational education, enhancing the participation of stakeholders in vocational educational cooperation, and promoting collaborative development among multiple entities [10]. After employment, align market organizations with vocational skills training and certification, student employment, and entrepreneurship services. Strengthen connections and mutual recognition with vocational education institutions in China and ASEAN member countries, establish a Sino-Vietnamese joint vocational skills training center, create a network alliance of vocational and technical colleges between China and ASEAN member countries, and hold vocational skills competitions to deepen the integration and exchange of vocational education.

Deepening cultural and educational exchanges promotes the teaching and dissemination of the Chinese language alongside the languages of

ASEAN countries, strengthens cognitive and cultural interactions, and lays a linguistic and cultural foundation for cooperation in other fields. Collaborative language education is beneficial for achieving complementary and shared educational resources. China and ASEAN can enrich teaching content and enhance educational quality through various methods and platforms, such as teacher exchanges, joint textbook compilation and curriculum development, and the establishment of language and cultural centers. This not only provides students with more language learning resources and facilitates greater resource sharing, but also promotes communication and learning among teachers, fostering a mutually beneficial environment for teaching and research. Additionally, it supports the complementary advantages of teachers and students involved in the "Belt and Road" initiative. Furthermore, through language education collaboration, the language learning and communication skills of the local population will significantly improve, providing a foundation for future cross-border interactions in more fields or on a larger scale.

5.3 Social and Cultural Aspects

Strengthening cultural integration can be achieved through a variety of exchanges such as cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and academic lectures. These activities enhance the cultural exchange between China and ASEAN member countries and promote the innovative development of Chinese culture alongside the cultures of ASEAN nations. Cultural festivals offer the people of both countries a rich experience of food, dance, and music, allowing them to savor the essence of culture. Art exhibitions provide opportunities for artists and the public from both countries to exchange artistic ideas and works, while academic lectures create chances for scholars to share academic viewpoints and achievements. By organizing these events, the friendship between the people of China and ASEAN can be strengthened, leading to a deeper understanding of each other and laying a more solid public foundation for enhancing mutual cooperation and exchanges in economic and various other fields between China and ASEAN member countries.

Media interaction and promotion can be strengthened through both traditional and new media to enhance the visibility of successful projects and positive outcomes in educational

cooperation between the parties, thereby expanding the collaboration's social impact. Cultural exchange activities among scholars, students, and civil society groups from both sides can be encouraged through mutual visits, study abroad programs, and volunteer exchanges, allowing for direct engagement and understanding of the educational environments and social cultures of the partner country. This deep-level cultural exchange is conducive to eliminating cultural misunderstandings and fostering mutual trust and consensus in educational cooperation projects. The study and promotion of the languages and cultures of ASEAN countries can be enhanced to further improve language and cultural communication capabilities between the parties in educational cooperation, providing more favorable conditions for the effective implementation of cross-border education.

6. Conclusion

In summary, from the perspective of geopolitical relations, China-ASEAN cross-border educational cooperation serves as an important link for both parties to deepen cultural exchanges and promote regional development, while also facing practical challenges posed by a complex geopolitical environment. This study indicates that geopolitical factors profoundly influence the cooperation process by affecting regional stability, policy coordination, and mutual trust in interests. Additionally, internal disparities in development, institutional barriers, and cultural diversity further restrict the full release of cooperation potential. To address these challenges, this paper proposes systematic optimization pathways from three dimensions: policy and institutional coordination, alignment of educational practices, and integration of social and cultural elements. The aim is to establish a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable cooperation framework. In the future, China and ASEAN need to continuously enhance strategic mutual trust, innovate cooperation mechanisms, and promote cross-border educational cooperation to higher levels and deeper dimensions, thereby contributing solid educational and cultural strength to the construction of a closer China-ASEAN community with a shared future.

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