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INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM IN GLOBAL MUSEUM QUALITY ASSURANCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FIVE ACCREDITATION SYSTEMS

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Abstract: Museum accreditation has become a global instrument for defining institutional quality, yet the systems that administer it operate in radically different political economies. This study asks why accreditation systems embedded in such different states have come to resemble one another, through which mechanisms that resemblance was produced, and where it stops. Drawing on the theory of institutional isomorphism, it conducts a structured, focused comparison of five major systems: the American Alliance of Museums accreditation programme, the Arts Council England Accreditation Scheme, the International Council of Museums, the Chinese national museum grading system, and the Japanese public-interest certification regime. Each system is profiled against a common template and then compared across the three isomorphic mechanisms of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressure. The analysis finds strong convergence across all five systems on the vocabulary of the good museum, on standards-based evaluation, on periodic review, and on a shared professional ethics. Convergence is driven by coercive pressure where accreditation gates public funding, as in England and China; by mimetic borrowing from the prestigious American model; and by normative diffusion of the scripts authored by the international council. Convergence is not total, however. The two East Asian cases adopt international forms while routing them through distinctive national logics, so that shared architecture serves different ends. The paper argues for a convergence-with-decoupling thesis and proposes translation as a complement to the three classic mechanisms, capturing how globally shared forms are reshaped as they cross into national institutional settings.
Keywords: Institutional isomorphism; Museum accreditation; Quality assurance; Cultural heritage governance; Comparative case study; Policy diffusion; Convergence

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Global Rise of Museum Accreditation

By recent estimates more than ninety thousand museums operate worldwide, and the figure has grown steadily across two decades of museum building [1]. As the sector has expanded, so has the apparatus used to judge what counts as a credible museum. National and international bodies now run accreditation and evaluation schemes that set written standards, assess institutions against them, and confer a recognised mark on those that comply. The American accreditation programme certifies roughly eleven hundred institutions; the English scheme accredits on the order of seventeen hundred; the Chinese grading system has ranked around a thousand; and the international professional council supplies the definitions and ethics codes that frame all of them. Accreditation has, in short, become a global lingua franca for institutional quality in a sector once governed mainly by local tradition and curatorial judgement [2].

This development is easy to take for granted and hard to explain. Museums are among the most local of cultural institutions. They hold particular collections, tell national and civic stories, and depend on local or national public budgets and private donors [3]. The literature on the English sector shows that accreditation schemes do not merely measure this diverse landscape but actively define its boundaries, deciding which institutions count as museums at all [4]. Comparative work on Chinese and international heritage practice further shows that the same procedures can carry different meanings in different settings [5]. The spread of a common quality apparatus across such varied ground is therefore a genuine puzzle rather than an administrative inevitability.

1.2 The Puzzle of Convergence in Cultural-sector Governance

The puzzle sharpens when the systems are placed side by side. The five examined here operate in radically different political economies: a liberal, philanthropy-driven sector in the United States; a public-funding-led sector in the United Kingdom; a single-party state in China; a parliamentary democracy with deep professional traditions in Japan; and a global membership body spanning more than a hundred countries. These settings differ in almost every respect that should matter for how a museum is governed. Yet their accreditation systems look remarkably alike in form, procedure, and vocabulary. Why should institutions embedded in such different states converge on a common model of quality assurance?

Convergence theory warns against treating such resemblance as either accidental or inevitable. Beckert argues that the same institutional pressures can yield convergence and divergence at once, depending on how local actors interpret

shared models [6]. Comparative studies of corporate responsibility reporting across several countries find common templates overlaying durable national differences, a pattern that recurs across institutional domains [7,8]. The economic convergence debate offers a cautionary parallel, where decades of analysis failed to confirm simple convergence and pointed instead to conditional, club-like patterns [9]. Museums add their own complication, since they are explicitly bound up with national identity: scholarship documents how Chinese museums construct national narratives and how Japanese museums emerged from a state-building project [10,11]. The question is therefore not whether these systems resemble one another, which they plainly do, but on which dimensions they have converged, through what mechanisms, and where convergence gives way to enduring national difference.

1.3 Research Questions and Contributions

This study addresses three linked questions. First, to what extent have the five major museum accreditation systems converged on common standards, indicators, and procedures? Second, through which mechanisms—coercive, mimetic, or normative—did convergence occur in each case? Third, where does convergence stop, and what national institutional logics account for the residual divergence? The questions move deliberately from describing the outcome to identifying its causes and then to mapping its limits.

The contribution is threefold. Empirically, the paper offers the first structured comparison of five major museum accreditation systems within a single analytical frame, a comparison that the existing single-country and bilateral studies have not attempted. Theoretically, it extends institutional isomorphism from its home in organisational sociology and public administration into the cultural-heritage sector [12,13], where the framework has rarely been applied systematically. Conceptually, it draws on the precedent of treating a cross-national family of standards as an isomorphic field and argues that the original three-mechanism account needs a fourth idea [14], translation, to explain how shared forms are reshaped as they cross borders.

1.4 Theoretical and Methodological Positioning

The study sits at the intersection of three literatures that rarely meet: institutional theory in sociology, comparative public policy in political science, and museum studies in the humanities. Institutional theory supplies the explanatory mechanisms; comparative policy supplies the vocabulary of diffusion and transfer; and museum studies supplies the empirical knowledge of how these institutions actually work. Bringing the three together is itself part of the contribution, since each has examined accreditation only partially and none has combined them on this object.

Methodologically, the paper uses a structured, focused comparison of five purposively selected systems. The approach follows the qualitative case-study tradition, in which a contemporary phenomenon is examined in depth within its real-world context [15], and applies an identical analytical template to every case so that the comparison rests on equal terms [16]. To explain how international templates reach and reshape national systems, the analysis traces the causal steps within each case rather than relying on correlation alone [17]. The design treats a heterogeneous set of governance instruments as a single comparative field, a move with direct precedent in the comparative cultural-policy literature [18]. The cases were chosen to maximise variation on political regime, funding model, and date of origin while holding constant the shared outcome of institutionalised accreditation, a configuration well suited to isolating which conditions matter.

1.5 Structure of the Paper

The paper proceeds as follows. The next chapter develops the theoretical framework, setting out the three mechanisms of isomorphism and connecting them to the convergence and diffusion literatures. The third chapter reviews the scholarship on museum quality assurance and governance and locates the research gap. The fourth chapter explains the comparative method, case selection, and sources. The fifth chapter profiles the five systems using a common template. The sixth chapter compares them, scoring each on the three mechanisms and identifying the boundary conditions where convergence stops. The seventh chapter discusses the theoretical and practical implications, and the eighth concludes. The argument advanced throughout is that convergence dominates the global field of museum accreditation, but that it is mediated by national institutional logics that leave shared forms doing different work in different places.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM

This study reads museum accreditation through the lens of institutional isomorphism. The framework explains why organisations that operate in different national settings, serve different publics, and answer to different paymasters nonetheless come to resemble one another in form, procedure, and vocabulary. The sections below set out the core mechanisms and trace their migration from organisational sociology into public-sector and nonprofit research. They then connect those mechanisms to two adjacent literatures, convergence theory and policy diffusion, which supply the comparative vocabulary used in later chapters. A final section introduces decoupling, which provides the conceptual tool for distinguishing surface convergence from deep institutional difference.

2.1 The Three Mechanisms of Isomorphic Change

The starting point is DiMaggio and Powell's account of why organisational fields grow more homogeneous over time [12]. Their central claim inverts a common-sense assumption. Organisations do not converge because uniform structures are technically superior; they converge because shared structures confer legitimacy. An organisation that looks like its peers is easier to fund, easier to trust, and easier to defend when challenged. DiMaggio and Powell identified three distinct routes to this resemblance, and the distinction among them organises the entire empirical analysis that follows.

Coercive isomorphism arises from external pressure. A funding agency, a regulator, or a parent ministry attaches conditions to resources, and organisations reshape themselves to satisfy those conditions. The pressure may be formal, such as a statutory requirement, or informal, such as the expectation that a credible institution will hold a recognised credential. Mimetic isomorphism operates under uncertainty. When goals are ambiguous and the definition of quality is contested, organisations copy peers they regard as successful, treating imitation as a low-risk response to an unclear problem. Normative isomorphism flows from professionalisation. Shared training, professional associations, and circulating personnel spread common standards of practice, so that members of a field come to share assumptions about what a competent organisation does.

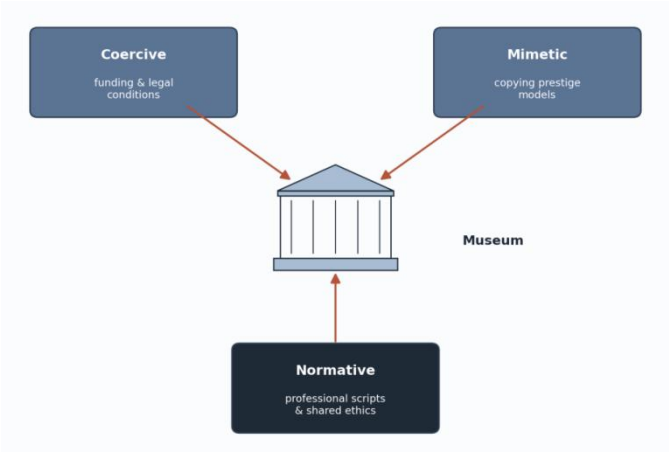

Figure 1 The Three Mechanisms of Institutional Isomorphism Acting on a Museum: Coercive Pressure (chain, left), Mimetic Imitation (Mirror, Right), and Normative Influence Carried by Professional Communities (Ring of Figures, below)

The three mechanisms are analytically distinct but empirically entangled (Figure 1). A single accreditation scheme can carry all three at once. A ministry may tie funding to the credential (coercion); the scheme may have been modelled on a respected foreign system (mimicry); and its criteria may be written by the same professional community that trains the sector's curators (norms). The value of the typology is not that it sorts cases into three boxes, but that it lets the analyst ask, for any given system, which channel carries the most weight and which carries the least. That question structures the comparison in later chapters, where the relative strength of the three mechanisms turns out to be the main axis along which the five systems differ. The mechanisms also differ in what they predict about resistance. Coercive pressure tends to produce visible compliance that may mask continued local practice, whereas normative pressure, working through shared belief, reaches deeper but spreads more slowly.

These mechanisms rest on an older insight. Meyer and Rowan argued that formal organisational structures often function as myth and ceremony rather than as efficient machinery [19]. Rules, charts, and credentials signal conformity to institutional expectations, and that signal can matter more than any measurable effect on output. The argument matters here because accreditation is precisely such a signal: a museum that earns a recognised mark advertises its conformity to a shared ideal of the good museum, whether or not the mark changes what happens inside the building. Scott's later synthesis of the field situates these mechanisms within a broader account of how institutions supply the rules, norms, and shared understandings that constrain organisational behaviour [20]. Together the three works provide the analytical grammar of this study: convergence is real, convergence is driven by legitimacy rather than efficiency, and convergence travels along three separable channels.

2.2 Isomorphism in Public-sector and Nonprofit Settings

Museums sit awkwardly between the market, the state, and civil society, so the relevant evidence comes less from corporate research than from work on public agencies and nonprofit organisations. Frumkin and Galaskiewicz provide the key bridge, showing that public organisations are if anything more exposed to isomorphic pressure than private firms, because they depend more heavily on the state for both resources and legitimacy [13]. Their finding matters for the cases that follow, where the link between accreditation and public money turns out to be the strongest single driver of convergence.

A cluster of nonprofit studies refines the picture. Verbruggen and colleagues examined why nonprofits comply with reporting standards and found that both resource dependence and coercive pressure shape compliance, with the two

often reinforcing each other [21]. Leiter's analysis of Australian nonprofit organisations documented structural isomorphism across a large and varied population, confirming that the homogenising tendency is not an artefact of any single national setting [22]. More recent work has grown sceptical. Hersberger-Langloh and colleagues asked whether the spread of managerial practices through the nonprofit sector improves performance or merely imports a fashionable template, and concluded that the answer is far from settled [23]. Krause and colleagues traced how coercive pressure ripples outward through interlocking governance ties, so that a requirement imposed at one point can reshape organisations several steps removed from the original demand [24]. This body of work supplies two lessons for the present study. Convergence in the nonprofit world is well documented, and the most powerful lever is the coupling of conformity to resources.

2.3 Convergence and Divergence Revisited

A naive reading of isomorphism predicts ever-tightening uniformity. The comparative literature complicates that prediction, and Beckert's reassessment is central to the argument advanced here [6]. Beckert argues that the same institutional mechanisms can produce convergence in some conditions and divergence in others, because actors interpret and apply shared models through local frames. Convergence and divergence are therefore not opposite outcomes but joint products of a single process. This study takes that claim as its analytical spine: the expectation is neither uniformity nor persistent national difference, but convergence on visible forms accompanied by divergence in how those forms are enforced and understood.

Comparative work outside the cultural sector shows how this dual pattern is studied empirically. Chen and Bouvain compared corporate responsibility reporting across the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Germany, and found common reporting templates overlaying durable national differences in substance [7]. Their four-country design is a direct methodological model for the five-system comparison developed in later chapters. Jamali and Neville studied corporate responsibility in developing economies and proposed an embedded, multi-layered institutional lens, in which global scripts and local logics operate simultaneously at different levels [8]. That layered view explains how a museum system can adopt an international vocabulary at its surface while retaining a distinctive governance logic underneath. Islam's survey of the economic convergence debate supplies useful caution from a neighbouring discipline, where decades of work failed to confirm simple convergence and instead pointed to conditional, club-like patterns [9]. The lesson carries over: convergence claims must specify on what dimension, among which units, and under what conditions.

This study therefore treats convergence as a question rather than an assumption. It asks separately about three layers: the vocabulary a system uses to define a good museum, the procedures it uses to evaluate one, and the consequences it attaches to the result. A system can converge sharply on the first two while diverging on the third, and the analysis is designed to detect exactly that pattern. Framing the inquiry this way guards against two opposite errors. One is the diffusionist error of reading shared language as proof of shared practice. The other is the particularist error of treating every national difference as evidence that global models do not travel. Beckert's dual-outcome view rejects both, and the empirical chapters are built to honour that position by reporting convergence and divergence on the same cases rather than choosing between them.

2.4 Policy Diffusion as a Parallel Literature

Institutional isomorphism has a close cousin in political science, where scholars study how policies spread across borders. The two literatures developed separately but describe overlapping phenomena, and reading them together sharpens the mechanisms at work in cross-national accreditation. Dolowitz and Marsh provided the foundational framework, defining policy transfer as the process by which knowledge about institutions in one setting is used to develop institutions in another [25]. Their account distinguishes voluntary lesson-drawing from coercive imposition, a distinction that maps neatly onto the coercive and mimetic mechanisms of isomorphism.

Subsequent work specified the channels more precisely. Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett organised the field around four mechanisms—coercion, competition, learning, and emulation—and weighed the evidence for each [26]. Shipan and Volden distinguished learning, imitation, competition, and coercion, and stressed that the mechanisms leave different empirical traces, a point that informs the process-tracing strategy adopted in the methodology [27]. Simmons and Elkins demonstrated that the international spread of liberal economic policies followed patterns of both competition and social emulation rather than independent national choice [28]. The transnational dimension is developed by Stone. She showed that policy travels through networks of transfer agents—consultants, professional bodies, and international organisations—rather than moving directly between states [29]. In later work she reframed transfer as translation, in which a model is actively reshaped as it crosses contexts rather than copied intact [30]. That reframing matters for museums, because the national systems examined here do not import an international template wholesale; they edit it to fit domestic law, funding structures, and political priorities. Marsh and Sharman clarified the relationship between diffusion and transfer and warned against treating either as automatic [31]. True and Mintrom showed how transnational advocacy networks drove the rapid global spread of gender mainstreaming, a vivid case of network-borne diffusion [32].

Most directly relevant is Radaelli, who analysed policy transfer in the European Union explicitly as institutional isomorphism that supplies legitimacy to participating states [14]. Radaelli's study is the closest precedent for treating a cross-national family of standards as an isomorphic field, and it anchors the analytical move at the heart of this paper.

2.5 Decoupling, Reactivity, and the Symbolic-substantive Gap

If convergence is partly ceremonial, then the gap between adopted form and actual practice becomes a central object of study. The concept of decoupling captures this gap. Espeland and Sauder's analysis of how rankings reshape the organisations they measure is the most directly useful statement for the present case [33]. They show that quantified external evaluations are reactive: organisations change their behaviour to improve their scores, sometimes in ways that subvert the goals the measure was meant to serve. Accreditation, like ranking, is an external evaluation that invites strategic response, and this insight frames the later discussion of how museums adapt to standardised criteria. In a companion study, Sauder and Espeland found that the pressure of rankings is often internalised rather than buffered, tightening the coupling between external measure and internal conduct and limiting how far an organisation can simply perform compliance on paper [34].

The decoupling literature itself has moved on from a simple form-versus-practice dichotomy. Coburn showed that the relationship between institutional environment and frontline practice is more interactive than early models assumed, with external demands reshaping practice in partial and uneven ways [35]. Jamali found that multinational firms responding to international accountability standards displayed a mix of symbolic conformity and genuine adoption, rather than one or the other [36]. Haack and Schoeneborn questioned whether decoupling has drifted too far from its theoretical roots and called for renewed conceptual discipline [37]. Taken together, this work supports the study's central thesis: convergence on standards can coexist with substantial variation in enforcement and meaning, and that coexistence is the rule rather than the exception.

Two studies extend the frame to the global level. Beckfield documented the structure of the world polity through the network of international organisations, showing that it is unevenly organised rather than flat [38]. Kentikelenis and Seabrooke analysed how international bodies write the scripts that national actors then adopt, treating script-writing as a concrete mechanism of global normative diffusion [39]. This mechanism is directly relevant to the international council examined in the case studies, which functions less as an enforcer than as an author of the templates that national systems reproduce. With these tools in place—three mechanisms of isomorphism, a convergence-divergence dual outcome, a diffusion vocabulary, and a decoupling lens—the analysis can now turn to the literature on museum quality assurance and then to the comparison itself.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW: MUSEUM QUALITY ASSURANCE AND GOVERNANCE

The theoretical framework in the previous chapter supplied the explanatory lens. This chapter turns to the empirical field that the lens is trained upon: the scholarship on quality assurance and governance in museums and the wider cultural sector. The review proceeds from the general phenomenon of accreditation across sectors, through the museum-specific literature on standards and governance, to the gap that this study addresses.

3.1 Accreditation as a Cross-sector Phenomenon

Accreditation did not begin in the museum world. It matured first in other sectors, and that history is instructive because it shows how a credentialing model travels. Higher education built elaborate accreditation systems over several decades, and recent reviews document both their spread and the persistent difficulty of demonstrating that they improve what they measure [40,41]. Healthcare followed, and systematic reviews of hospital accreditation reveal a striking pattern: the model has diffused worldwide, yet the evidence that it changes outcomes remains mixed and hard to establish [42,43]. These adjacent literatures matter for the present study in two ways. They supply an external benchmark for how credentialing systems behave once adopted, and they show that the gap between the spread of a standard and its demonstrable effect is a general feature of accreditation rather than a peculiarity of museums. The cultural sector entered this story comparatively late, and its governance has been analysed within a broader account of how culture is steered between political and professional authority [44].

3.2 Museum-specific Quality Assurance

Within the museum field, a body of work addresses quality and its assessment directly. Studies of museum governance examine how institutions are steered and held accountable, including the financial governance of donor-dependent art museums [3], the influence of management and governance mode on institutional behaviour [45], and the way visitors themselves perceive governance and value [46]. A second strand examines service and standards. Research on museum service quality has extracted measurable dimensions from visitor experience [47], while work on environmental and operational standards documents the gap between what regulations require and what institutions deliver [48]. A third strand connects museums to cultural policy, situating quality assurance within debates over sustainability, stakeholders, and the public purposes that museums are expected to serve [49]. Together these studies establish that museum quality is a live scholarly concern, but they tend to treat single systems or single dimensions rather than comparing accreditation regimes across countries.

3.3 Museum Governance Scholarship

A broader governance literature frames how museums relate to states, markets, and publics. Foucauldian analyses treat the museum as an instrument of liberal government, a site where collecting and ordering serve the governance of populations [50,51]. Work on heritage management emphasises stakeholder collaboration as a condition of legitimate governance [52], and studies of accounting and transparency examine how the peculiar status of heritage assets complicates public accountability [53]. Recent scholarship tracks how governance is being reshaped by external forces: administrative reform of cultural ministries [54], the disruptive influence of digital platform companies on museum policy and practice [55], and the enduring tension between instrumental policy goals and professional autonomy [56,57]. Foundational texts on the museum's interpretive and experiential role supply the disciplinary backdrop against which these governance debates unfold [58]. This literature is rich, but it is overwhelmingly oriented toward how individual museums are governed rather than toward the supra-institutional systems that accredit them.

3.4 The Research Gap

Three literatures thus run in parallel without meeting. Institutional theory explains why organisations converge but has rarely been applied to museum accreditation. Policy diffusion explains how models travel but has concentrated on economic and social policy rather than cultural credentialing. Museum studies understands museum governance in depth but treats accreditation mostly within single national settings. No study brings the three together to compare several museum accreditation systems as an isomorphic field.

The closest precedents reveal the gap by their limits. The most direct study of a national accreditation scheme examines the English case alone and is concerned chiefly with the museums the scheme excludes rather than with cross-national comparison [4]. A systematic comparison of Chinese and international heritage practice addresses participation rather than accreditation as such, and covers two settings rather than five [5]. A comparison of cultural-sector models across Norway, the United States, and Japan comes closest in spirit, but it concerns public libraries rather than museums and does not deploy the isomorphism framework [59]. The strongest theoretical precedent treats European policy transfer explicitly as institutional isomorphism, yet it analyses policy harmonisation among states rather than accreditation of cultural institutions [14]. Each of these works illuminates one corner of the problem. None combines a five-system scope, an accreditation-specific focus, and an explicit isomorphism framework. That combination is the contribution this study makes, and the chapters that follow build it case by case.

4 METHODOLOGY

This study uses a structured, focused comparison of five museum accreditation systems. The design is qualitative and document-based rather than statistical, because the research questions concern mechanisms and meanings that a small, purposively chosen set of cases can illuminate more sharply than a large sample. This chapter sets out the logic of the design, the criteria used to select the five systems, the documentary and secondary sources analysed, the coding scheme applied to each case, and the strategy used to compare across them. Throughout, the aim is transparency about what the study can and cannot claim on the basis of its evidence.

4.1 A Structured, Focused Comparative Design

The core method is the comparative case study as developed in the qualitative tradition. Yin's framework treats the case study as a way to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, which suits accreditation systems that are inseparable from their national legal and fiscal settings [15]. George and Bennett's method of structured, focused comparison supplies the operational discipline: the researcher asks the same set of theoretically grounded questions of every case, so that the answers can be compared on equal terms [16]. Each of the five systems in this study is therefore interrogated with an identical template covering its origin, its criteria, its evaluation procedure, its consequences, and its relationship to international norms.

To trace how convergence happens rather than merely to document that it has happened, the analysis draws on process tracing. Beach and Pedersen treat process tracing as a method for identifying the causal steps that link a condition to an outcome within a single case [17]. Here it is used to follow the path by which an international template, such as a museum definition or an ethics code, reaches a national system and is rewritten there. The study does not adopt the formal apparatus of qualitative comparative analysis, but it is informed by that literature. The configurational logic of QCA—the idea that outcomes follow from combinations of conditions rather than single variables—shapes how the three isomorphic mechanisms are compared across cases [60,61]. The standards of good practice articulated for set-theoretic methods reinforce the requirement that case knowledge precede comparison [62-64]. Coding of documentary material follows the constant comparative approach, in which categories are refined iteratively as successive sources are read [65]. The combination yields a comparison that is systematic without forcing qualitative material into a quantitative mould.

4.2 Case Selection

Five systems were selected to maximise variation on the suspected causal conditions while holding the outcome roughly constant. They are the American Alliance of Museums accreditation programme, the Arts Council England Accreditation Scheme, the International Council of Museums, the Chinese national museum grading system, and the

Japanese public-interest certification regime. All five operate an institutionalised function that defines a credible museum, sets criteria, evaluates institutions against them, and attaches recognition to the result. That shared outcome makes them comparable. They differ sharply, however, on the conditions of interest: political regime, ranging from liberal democracies to a single-party state; funding model, ranging from largely private to wholly public; and date of origin, ranging from the United States programme launched in 1971 to the Chinese system launched in 2008.

This is a most-different design on the independent variables paired with a shared dependent variable, a configuration that George and Bennett identify as well suited to isolating which conditions matter [16]. The inclusion of the international council is deliberate and slightly unorthodox, since it does not accredit individual museums in the way the four national bodies do. It is retained because it is the principal source of the normative scripts that the national systems reproduce, and excluding it would hide the most important channel of convergence. The comparative cultural-policy literature supports treating a heterogeneous set of governance instruments as a single analytical field when they share a common function [18]. The selection is not a random sample and makes no claim to statistical representativeness; its logic is theoretical, chosen to expose mechanisms rather than to estimate their average strength across all museum systems worldwide.

4.3 Data Sources and Coding

The analysis rests on three tiers of evidence (Figure 2).

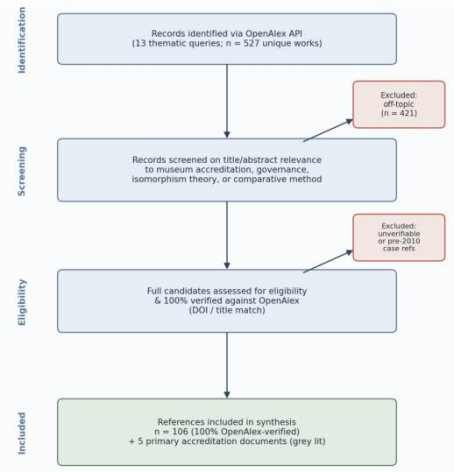

Figure 2 Literature Identification and Verification Flow

Of 527 unique records retrieved through the OpenAlex interface, 106 references were retained for synthesis and verified in full by DOI or title match, supplemented by five primary accreditation documents treated as grey literature. The first tier comprises primary institutional documents: the accreditation standards and ethics codes published by each body, together with the statutes and policy instruments that give them force. These include the American accreditation standards, the international ethics code and museum definition, the English accreditation standard, the Chinese grading measures, and the Japanese certification criteria. These documents are treated as primary sources that describe each system in its own terms, and they are used for case description rather than counted among the scholarly references. The second tier comprises the peer-reviewed scholarly literature, the body of journal articles and academic books that analyse these systems and supply the theoretical and comparative apparatus. The third tier comprises institutional data on the scale and operation of each system, such as the number of accredited institutions and the structure of evaluation cycles, drawn from official reports and corroborated against the scholarly literature.

Each case was coded against a common four-part scheme derived from the theoretical framework. The first category records the initiation context: who created the system, when, and in response to what problem. The second records coercive linkage: whether and how accreditation is tied to public funding, legal status, or tax treatment. The third records the mimetic referent: which prior model, if any, the system was built upon. The fourth records normative production: the degree to which the system originates or merely adopts professional standards. Categories were applied iteratively, with definitions refined as reading progressed, following the constant comparative method [65]. This scheme produces, for each system, a structured profile that feeds directly into the cross-case analysis.

4.4 Cross-case Comparison and Validity

The comparison proceeds in three stages. The first stage, presented in the case chapter, describes each system structurally using the common template. The second stage, presented in the cross-case chapter, scores each system on the relative strength of the three isomorphic mechanisms and identifies the dimensions on which the systems have converged. The third stage examines where convergence stops and asks what national institutional logics account for the residual divergence. This sequence moves from description to mechanism to boundary condition, mirroring the dual convergence-divergence outcome that the theoretical framework anticipates.

Several threats to validity deserve acknowledgement. Selecting cases on a shared outcome risks confirming convergence by construction; the inclusion of a non-accrediting international body and the explicit search for divergence are intended to offset this. Construct validity for the abstract notion of isomorphism is protected by coding the three mechanisms separately rather than inferring a single undifferentiated pressure. To guard against drawing conclusions from a sealed literature, the findings are cross-checked against accreditation research in adjacent sectors, where systematic reviews of hospital accreditation provide an external benchmark for how credentialing systems behave and how their effects are measured [42], [43]. Two limits remain and are stated plainly. The study relies on English-language scholarship, which understates the depth of Chinese-language research on the Chinese case, and it offers a synchronic snapshot rather than a longitudinal account of systems that continue to change. These constraints bound the claims that follow without undermining the central comparison.

5 THE FIVE CASES

This chapter profiles the five systems using the common template set out in the methodology. Each profile covers the system's origin, its criteria and evaluation procedure, and its coverage, governance, and relationship to public resources. The profiles are descriptive; the comparative argument about mechanisms is reserved for the following chapter. The order moves from the oldest national programme to the international body, and then to the two East Asian systems, so that the reader meets the likely sources of influence before the systems that may have drawn on them. Figure 3 places the five systems on a common timeline, showing the sequence of founding and accreditation milestones that underpins the analysis of influence.

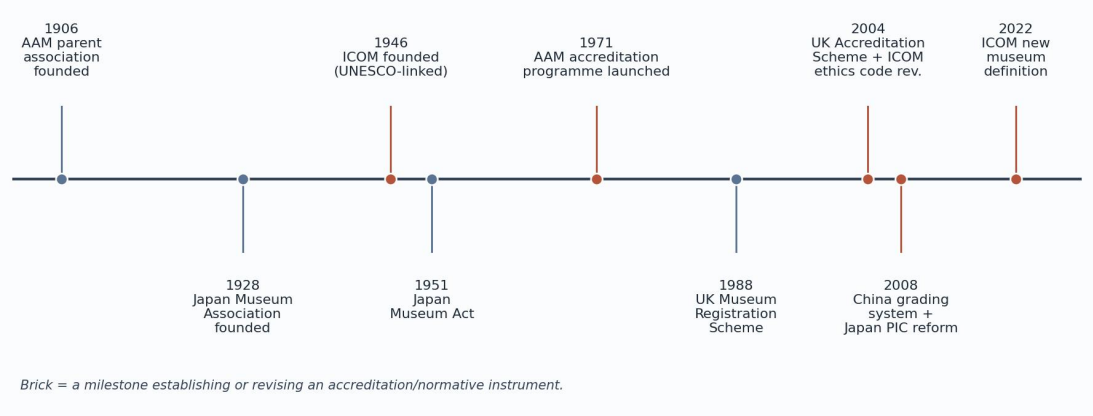

Figure 3 Founding and Accreditation Milestones of the Five Systems, 1906–2022
Note: Brick-red marks denote the establishment or revision of an accreditation or normative instrument; slate marks denote the founding of a parent body.

5.1 The American Alliance of Museums

5.1.1 Origin and development

The American accreditation programme is the oldest of the five and the one most often treated as a reference point by the others. Its parent body began in 1906 as the American Association of Museums, a professional association rather than a regulator. The accreditation programme itself was launched in 1971, at a moment when the American museum sector was expanding quickly and sought a way to distinguish established institutions from newer and less stable ones. In 2012 the association renamed itself the American Alliance of Museums, a change of label that signalled a broader advocacy role while leaving the accreditation function intact. The programme was therefore built by the profession, for the profession, and it has never been an instrument of a government ministry. This origin shapes everything that follows, because it locates the authority to define a good museum within the field rather than within the state.

5.1.2 Criteria and procedure

Accreditation rests on a set of core standards that describe what an excellent museum does across several domains. These include public trust and accountability, mission and planning, leadership and organisational structure, collections stewardship, education and interpretation, financial stability, and the management of facilities and risk. The standards are written as characteristics of an excellent institution rather than as pass-or-fail rules, which leaves room for museums of very different size and type to satisfy them in their own way. This flexibility is deliberate, since the programme must accommodate art museums, history museums, science centres, zoos, and botanical gardens within a single framework.

The procedure is demanding and unfolds over more than a year. An institution first conducts a structured self-study against the standards, a process that itself obliges the museum to articulate its mission and document its practices. It then submits this material for review, and finally hosts a visit by trained peer reviewers who report to an independent Accreditation Commission. The Commission, not the staff of the association, makes the final decision, and accreditation is reviewed on a multi-year cycle rather than granted permanently. The reliance on peer reviewers drawn from the profession is significant. It means that the judgement of quality is made by people socialised into shared professional norms, which is the textbook condition for normative influence. The self-study requirement adds a second effect that

matters for the convergence argument: it compels every applicant to restate its practice in the standard's own language, so that the vocabulary of the standard spreads even among museums that are never finally accredited.

5.1.3 Coverage, governance, and resources

Roughly eleven hundred institutions hold accreditation, a small fraction of the tens of thousands of entities that count as museums in the United States. Accreditation is voluntary and carries no automatic entitlement to public money, which distinguishes the American case sharply from the English and Chinese systems examined below. Its value is reputational: accreditation signals trustworthiness to donors, lenders, and partner institutions in a sector that depends heavily on private philanthropy. The absence of a funding gateway is itself analytically important, because it means the standard spreads through prestige and professional consensus rather than through the threat of lost income.

Research on American art museums documents how questions of governance, financial management, and donor relations dominate institutional life in this private-funding environment [3]. Diversity and philanthropy have become entangled in the funding model, so that decisions about whom to court as donors carry consequences for which histories a museum can tell [66]. More recent scholarship has turned a critical eye on the sector. One study examines transparency over staff pay and the labour politics that accreditation standards leave untouched [67]. Another questions whether the tax-exempt status that underwrites these museums is matched by the diversity of the institutions that enjoy it [68]. Earlier work on fundraising and on nonprofit values situates these debates in a longer American tradition that treats the museum as a voluntary, donor-supported organisation rather than a public charge [69,70]. Debates over whether such museums should charge admission show how this private-funding model shapes even the question of public access [71]. The wider policy setting is framed by two further studies: an account of cultural policy as a form of urban development policy in the United States [72], and a comparative analysis of national art museum governance under fiscal constraint that places the American model alongside others [73]. Finally, a discussion convened at the association's own annual meeting, addressing racism and the social role of the museum field, shows the body acting as a normative forum for the profession rather than as a compliance authority [74], a self-understanding that its own programme literature confirms [75]. The American case thus presents a system in which professional norms and reputational mimicry, not state coercion, do most of the work.

5.2 The Arts Council England Accreditation Scheme

5.2.1 Origin and development

The English scheme offers the sharpest contrast to the American one, because it is bound tightly to public funding. It began in 1988 as the Museum Registration Scheme, a relatively light-touch system intended to establish a baseline of acceptable practice across a diverse sector. In 2004 it was relaunched as the Accreditation Scheme, with more demanding standards. Administrative responsibility passed to Arts Council England in 2011 when the predecessor agency was abolished, consolidating the scheme within the body that also distributes much of the country's public arts funding. The scheme is operated on a United Kingdom-wide basis in partnership with the devolved national bodies, which gives it a reach across political boundaries that the strictly national systems lack.

5.2.2 Criteria and procedure

The English standard organises its requirements into three broad areas: organisational health, collections management, and users and their experience. An applicant museum must demonstrate sound governance and a viable business plan, appropriate care of its collections, and a credible commitment to public access and engagement. Assessment operates on a rolling cycle, with periodic returns rather than a single permanent award, so that accredited status must be maintained rather than simply achieved. The standard is explicitly a minimum threshold rather than a mark of excellence, which differentiates it from the American model: where the American programme certifies the strongest institutions, the English scheme aims to bring the whole sector up to a common floor.

5.2.3 Coverage, governance, and resources

The scheme covers a large share of the sector, with on the order of seventeen hundred accredited museums, a far higher penetration than the American programme achieves. The reason is structural. Accredited status is a gateway to public resources: it is a precondition or a strong advantage for many grants from Arts Council England and from national lottery funds. This funding linkage is the defining feature of the case and the clearest instance of coercive isomorphism among the five systems. Museums adopt the standard not merely for reputation but to remain eligible for the money they depend on, which converts a voluntary mark into a practical necessity.

The scholarship reflects this funding-centred character. A critical analysis of public value shows how the funding body must continually justify its expenditure in political terms, a pressure that flows downward into the conditions it sets for museums [76]. A study of austerity traces how the language of resilience entered the funding relationship during a period of cuts, recasting survival as a quality the sector was expected to demonstrate [77]. An analysis of how the funding body shapes a national cultural ecology demonstrates the reach of its investment decisions across the country [78], and a further account documents how the sector's own history has been recorded and institutionalised [79].

Critical work has also questioned the limits of the system. A study of the sector argues that the accreditation lens renders a large population of informal and unofficial museums effectively invisible, because they fall outside the scheme's definition of what counts [4]. This is a telling observation for the present argument, since it shows that an accreditation standard does not merely measure a sector but defines its boundaries.

Other research locates the scheme within wider strains on the sector. One study examines the corporate colonisation of museum work and the managerial values that accompany it [80]. Another analyses the digital response of museums to

the pandemic, when accredited institutions improvised public access under closure [81]. A comparison of British and American data practices highlights cross-national difference within the shared language of museum management, a useful reminder that common vocabulary can conceal divergent practice [82]. Studies of cultural consumption and of cultural policy as rhetoric situate the scheme within longer debates about who museums actually serve [83,84]. The English case is, in sum, the system where the link between accreditation and money is most explicit, and where coercive pressure is correspondingly strongest.

5.3 The International Council of Museums

5.3.1 Origin and normative role

The international council differs from the other four systems in a fundamental way: it does not accredit individual museums. It is included because it is the principal author of the professional scripts that the national systems reproduce, and to omit it would be to hide the main channel of normative convergence. Founded in 1946 and associated with the United Nations cultural organisation, the council brings together tens of thousands of museum professionals across well over a hundred countries. Its authority is normative rather than coercive. It cannot compel any museum to do anything, but it can define the terms in which the whole field thinks about itself. This is a subtler form of power than the funding control wielded by the English scheme, yet it may reach further, because it operates through shared belief rather than external sanction. A national system can ignore a funding rule by forgoing the funds; it cannot easily ignore the very definition of what a museum is.

5.3.2 Normative outputs

The council's most consequential products are its code of ethics and its definition of the museum. The code of ethics, first adopted in the 1980s and revised since, sets out professional obligations on matters such as acquisition, care, and community responsibility, and it is referenced by national systems as a baseline of acceptable conduct [85]. The definition of the museum is even more central, because it fixes the boundary of the entire category. Scholarship describes this definition as the backbone of the organisation, the statement from which its other standards descend [86]. The definition is not static. An influential reconsideration argued for understanding the museum through its social role rather than its collections [87], and the history of the concept shows repeated revision in response to changing expectations [88]. The council also issues standards on specific questions, such as the widely cited declaration on environmental guidelines for collections care [89], which demonstrates how a normative body shapes technical practice across borders.

5.3.3 The definition controversy as a test of normative reach

The limits of normative authority became visible in the recent controversy over revising the museum definition. A proposed new definition provoked sustained disagreement among national committees, and the process of adopting a revised text proved difficult and protracted [90]. The episode is analytically valuable because it reveals the mechanism at work. When the central script is stable, national systems adopt it readily; when it is contested, they hesitate, choose among versions, or wait. Critical scholarship has further argued that communities at the periphery of the council's definition experience its normative authority unevenly, raising the question of whose museum the global definition describes [91]. The definitional literature that anchors the council's role confirms how much rests on this single statement [1]. The international case therefore supplies the clearest example of normative isomorphism among the five systems, and its periodic crises offer a natural experiment in how far a script can travel when its authors disagree.

5.4 The Chinese National Museum Grading System

5.4.1 Origin and development

The Chinese system is the youngest of the five and the most directly state-led. It was launched in 2008 under the national cultural heritage authority, working with the national museums association, as part of a broader effort to professionalise a sector that was expanding at remarkable speed. The first round identified a small group of top-grade institutions, and successive rounds over the following decade extended the system across the country. The timing is significant. The grading system arrived during the period that scholars have called the Chinese museum boom, in which new museums opened in large numbers as instruments of soft power and cultural nationalism [92]. The system was, in effect, a tool for imposing order on rapid growth, supplying the state with a way to distinguish credible institutions from the many that appeared in a short span of years.

5.4.2 Criteria and procedure

The system sorts museums into three grades through a points-based assessment. Evaluation covers a museum's overall management and infrastructure, the scale and care of its collections, and the quality of its exhibitions, research, and public services. The framework adopts the international definition of the museum and references international professional standards in its preamble, which places it within the same normative orbit as the other systems. Yet the weighting reflects national priorities. Criteria that capture a museum's social and educational benefit carry substantial weight, consistent with an official expectation that museums serve public-facing political and pedagogical goals as well as professional ones. The grade is not permanent; museums are periodically re-assessed, and grade carries concrete consequences for an institution's standing and resources.

5.4.3 Coverage, governance, and resources

By the early 2020s the system had graded on the order of a thousand museums, a figure that continues to grow as new rounds proceed. Grade is tied to the state in a way that has no parallel in the American or international cases: higher-graded museums attract greater public investment, infrastructure support, and official recognition, which makes the grading both a quality signal and a resource-allocation device. This dual function gives the Chinese case a coercive character comparable to the English scheme, but routed through the state rather than an arm's-length funding body. The scholarship situates the system within a distinctive political setting. Studies of museums and nationalism in contemporary China show how the sector carries an explicit role in constructing national narratives [10]. Analyses of postsocialist memory document how museums stage an official version of the past [93]. A book-length account of Chinese museums describes the institutional landscape in which the grading system operates [94], and a comparison of Chinese and international practice in heritage management shows both borrowing and divergence in how participation is understood [5].

Further research fills out a sector that adopts international forms while remaining embedded in national political logic. Work on contested authenticity examines how official heritage practice reshapes what counts as genuine [95]. Studies of new cultural technologies in Chinese museums and of museums as a governance experiment show the sector experimenting with form while the state retains control of purpose [96,97]. Research on audiences and on heritage governance in a major Chinese city documents how these institutions meet the public [98,99]. Taken together, the Chinese case combines coercive linkage with normative borrowing, and it is the first of the two systems where the gap between adopted form and local logic becomes a central feature rather than a footnote.

5.5 The Japanese Public-interest Certification Regime

5.5.1 Origin and development

The Japanese case is the most institutionally complex of the five, because museum recognition runs through more than one channel. A professional museums association was established in 1928, and a national museum law enacted in the mid-twentieth century created a registration system administered through local education authorities. Layered on top of this, a reform of the public-interest corporation system in 2008 introduced certification as a public-interest incorporated foundation, granted by a national commission and carrying tax advantages and access to public support. Museum status in Japan is therefore distributed across a museum-specific registration system and a general public-interest certification, and the two together define what a credible Japanese museum looks like. The historical roots run deep: scholarship on museums in imperial Japan shows that the modern museum arrived as part of a state-building project, a legacy that still shapes the relationship between museums and public authority [11].

5.5.2 Criteria, governance, and resources

The Japanese arrangement occupies a middle position between professional self-governance and state direction. Standards are developed substantially within the sector and the profession, in a manner closer to the American model, yet final certification is granted by a state body, in a manner closer to the Chinese model. The result is a hybrid in which professional norms and state ratification operate together rather than in opposition. The scholarship illuminates this through several angles rather than through accreditation studies as such, reflecting the thinner English-language literature on the Japanese system specifically. Work on heritage as soft power examines how Japan, like China, mobilises cultural institutions in international politics [100]. Studies of disaster museums [101], of war memory and its contested presentation [102], and of a civil-society museum addressing a difficult history show how Japanese museums negotiate between public expectation and professional judgement [103]. Research on heritage consumption and authenticity, on the local impact of world heritage designation, and a book-length account of heritage and tourism in Japan document the sector's public-facing character. A comparison of Norwegian, American, and Japanese cultural-sector models is especially useful, because it places the Japanese approach directly alongside two Western systems and confirms both shared structure and national distinctiveness [59]. The Japanese case rounds out the comparison as a second East Asian system in which international forms are adopted but filtered through a national institutional arrangement that has no exact counterpart elsewhere.

5.5.3 The two East Asian systems in preview

The Chinese and Japanese cases are deliberately given less space than the three older systems, partly because the English-language scholarship on their accreditation functions is thinner, and partly because their analytical contribution is concentrated rather than broad. Both systems demonstrate the same point from different angles. Each adopts the international vocabulary of the good museum, and each runs an evaluation that would be recognisable to an American or English museum professional. Yet each routes that evaluation through a national institutional logic—direct state allocation in the Chinese case, hybrid professional-state certification in the Japanese case—that reshapes what the shared form actually does. They are, in other words, the clearest evidence for the study's central claim that convergence on form coexists with divergence in logic, and they are taken up directly in the cross-case analysis that follows.

6 CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS: MECHANISMS OF CONVERGENCE

The five profiles share a striking family resemblance. All five define a credible museum in similar terms, evaluate institutions against written standards, run periodic review rather than one-off approval, and invoke a common professional vocabulary of stewardship, public service, and accountability. This is the convergence that the study set out

to explain. The task of this chapter is to show through which mechanisms that convergence was produced, and then to identify where it stops. The analysis takes the three isomorphic mechanisms in turn, scores the systems on each, and closes with the boundary conditions that the two East Asian cases bring into view. Figure 4 summarises the resulting pattern, scoring each system on the relative strength of the three mechanisms.

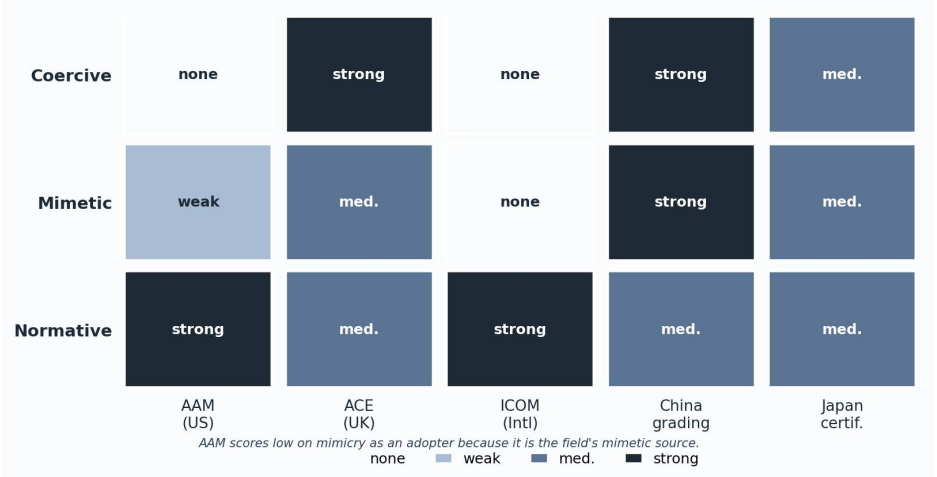

Figure 4 Relative Strength of the Three Isomorphic Mechanisms across the Five Systems

The American programme scores low on mimicry as an adopter because it is itself the field's principal mimetic source.

6.1 Coercive Convergence

The clearest driver of convergence is the coupling of accreditation to resources. Where a system makes recognition a condition of funding, museums adopt the standard because they must, and the public-sector literature predicts exactly this outcome: organisations dependent on the state for resources and legitimacy are the most exposed to coercive pressure [13]. The nonprofit evidence reinforces the point, showing that resource dependence and coercive pressure typically operate together rather than separately [21], and that the resulting compliance can be substantial rather than cosmetic [23].

Two systems exhibit strong coercive linkage. The English scheme ties accredited status to eligibility for arts and lottery funding, which converts a voluntary standard into a practical precondition for survival, and the critical literature confirms that this funding gateway also defines the sector's visible boundary [4]. The Chinese system ties grade to public investment and official standing, routing the same coercive logic through the state rather than an arm's-length body [92]. The two differ in their political form but share the underlying mechanism: a resource holder demands a legible signal of quality, and accreditation supplies it. The American system, by contrast, attaches no funding to accreditation, and its coercive component is correspondingly weak. The Japanese system occupies a middle position, since public-interest certification carries fiscal advantage without making accreditation a strict funding gate. The international council exerts no coercive pressure at all, because it controls no resources. Coercion therefore explains much of the convergence in two cases, little in one, and none in another, which is precisely the kind of variation the comparison was designed to expose.

6.2 Mimetic Convergence

The second mechanism is imitation under uncertainty. The definition of a good museum is genuinely ambiguous, and DiMaggio and Powell predict that organisations facing such ambiguity will copy models they regard as successful [12]. The policy-diffusion literature describes the same behaviour from a different angle, treating emulation of prestigious exemplars as a recurrent feature of cross-national policy spread [26,27]. Espeland and Sauder's account of how organisations reshape themselves around respected external measures captures the dynamic at work when a national system reaches for an established foreign template [33].

The American programme is the field's principal mimetic referent. As the oldest national accreditation system, operating in the most visible and heavily resourced museum sector, it supplies a model that later systems consulted when designing their own. The reputational capital that accreditation carries in the American private-funding environment is well documented, and it is precisely this prestige that makes the model worth copying [3]. The English scheme, the Chinese system, and the Japanese arrangement all developed after the American programme and all show signs of having drawn on the same repertoire of self-study, written standards, peer or expert review, and periodic renewal. Mimicry here is not wholesale copying but selective borrowing of recognisable components, consistent with the reframing of policy transfer as active translation rather than passive adoption [30]. The direction of imitation is also informative. It runs from the older and more prestigious systems toward the newer ones, and not in reverse, which is the

signature of mimetic rather than merely parallel development. The international council sits outside this flow, because it is a source of norms rather than an adopter of another system's form.

6.3 Normative Convergence

The third mechanism is professional norm-setting, and it is where the international council becomes central. Normative isomorphism spreads through shared professional belief rather than through sanction, and it works by defining the categories in which a field thinks. The world-polity literature describes how international bodies write the scripts that national actors then enact, treating script authorship as a concrete mechanism of global diffusion [39], and how the resulting international structure is real though unevenly organised [38]. Transnational networks carry these scripts across borders [32].

The council's museum definition and ethics code are the scripts in question. The definition functions as the backbone of the entire field, the statement from which subordinate standards descend [86], and it is referenced, directly or indirectly, by all four national systems. When the council reconsidered the museum through its social role, the reconsideration rippled outward into national debates [87]. The strength of this mechanism is visible precisely when the script is contested. The recent controversy over revising the definition stalled adoption and divided national committees, demonstrating that national systems depend on the council for a settled definition and hesitate when none is available [90]. The episode also exposed the unevenness of normative reach, since communities at the periphery of the definition experience its authority differently from those at the centre [91]. Normative convergence is therefore both the most pervasive mechanism, because every system invokes the international vocabulary, and the most fragile, because it rests on a consensus that can break down. All four national systems converge on the council's normative language even as they diverge in how they enforce it, which sets up the boundary conditions examined next (Figure 5).

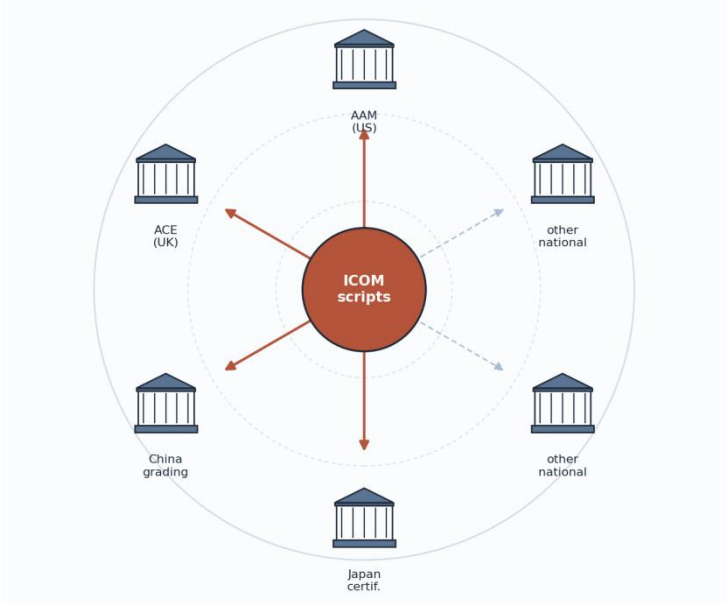

Figure 5 Normative Diffusion

Note: The international council functions as the central author of shared professional scripts (centre, in red), which radiate outward to national museum systems.

6.4 Boundary Conditions: the Limits of Convergence

Convergence dominates the comparison, but it is not total, and the two East Asian systems mark its limits most clearly. The argument here is not that convergence fails in China and Japan. It is that convergence operates on some dimensions and not others, exactly as Beckert's reassessment of isomorphism predicts when he treats convergence and divergence as joint products of a single process rather than as opposite outcomes [6]. The systems converge on vocabulary and procedure while diverging on the logic that animates them (Figure 6).

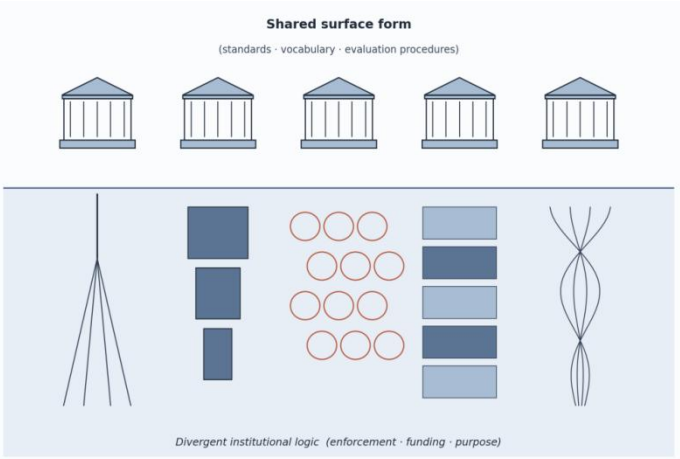

Figure 6 Convergence with Decoupling

The five systems share a standardised surface form, represented by the identical museum facades above the waterline, while diverging in their underlying institutional logic, represented by the distinct submerged foundations.

The Chinese case shows surface adoption with a different underlying purpose. The grading framework adopts the international definition and a recognisable evaluation procedure. Yet it weights social and educational benefit heavily and embeds the system in direct state allocation. The same form therefore serves an official narrative-building function that is absent from the American or English versions [10,93]. The Japanese case shows convergence filtered through a distinctive institutional arrangement, in which professionally generated standards receive state ratification, producing a hybrid that matches neither the American professional model nor the Chinese statist one [11]. In both cases the gap between adopted form and local logic is not a measurement error but the phenomenon itself, and it is best understood through the concept of decoupling, in which formal conformity coexists with substantive variation [35,36]. The mechanism that produces this pattern is translation: a model is actively reworked as it crosses into a new context rather than copied intact (Figure 7) [30]. The multi-layered institutional lens explains why surface and substance can diverge, since global scripts and local logics operate simultaneously at different levels of the same organisation [8].

This points toward a modest theoretical refinement. The original three-mechanism framework explains how forms spread but says less about how they are altered in transit. Adding translation as a complementary process captures what the East Asian cases display: convergence on the visible architecture of accreditation, accompanied by the quiet adaptation of its meaning to national institutional logic. Convergence, in short, is real and dominant, but it is mediated rather than mechanical, and the residual divergence is not noise but a predictable feature of how global models travel.

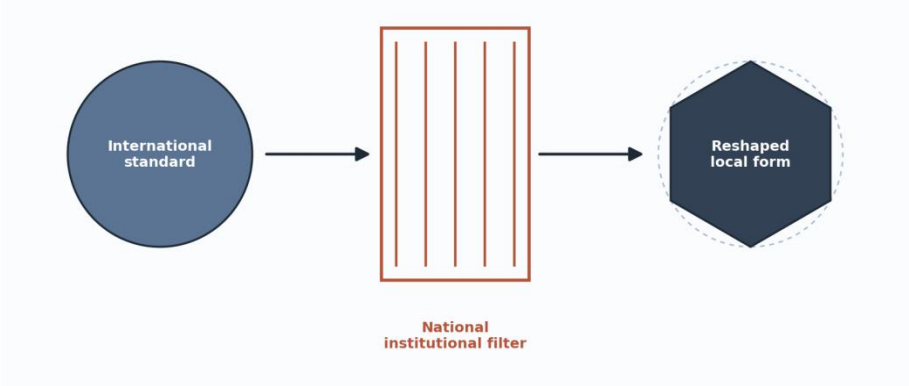

Figure 7 Policy as Translation

Note: An international standard (left) is reshaped as it passes through a national institutional filter (centre), emerging as a related but altered form (right).

7 DISCUSSION

The comparison yields a clear headline finding and a more careful qualification. The headline is that the five systems have converged substantially, and that convergence is the dominant pattern across the global field of museum accreditation. The qualification is that convergence is uneven across dimensions and mediated by national institutional logics. This chapter draws out what these findings mean for theory, for practice, and for the central thesis, before stating the limits of what the study can claim.

7.1 Theoretical Contributions

The first contribution is to extend institutional isomorphism into a sector where it has rarely been applied systematically. DiMaggio and Powell's framework was built from observations of firms, schools, and public agencies [12], and Frumkin's extension carried it into the public and nonprofit spheres [13]. The present study shows that the framework travels well to cultural-heritage governance: the three mechanisms cleanly distinguish the cases, and their relative strength turns out to be the main axis of variation among the five systems. Museum accreditation is, in this sense, a previously untapped confirmation of isomorphism theory in a domain its founders did not study.

The second contribution concerns the convergence-divergence relationship. The findings support Beckert's argument that convergence and divergence are joint products of one process rather than rival outcomes [6]. The systems converge on vocabulary, criteria, and procedure while diverging on enforcement and underlying purpose, and this dual pattern is not an anomaly to be explained away but the expected result of shared models meeting different institutional settings.

The third contribution follows from this. The original three-mechanism account explains how forms spread but says little about how they change in transit. The East Asian cases show forms being actively reworked rather than copied, which is better captured by the idea of translation than by mimicry alone [30]. Adding translation as a complementary process is a modest but useful refinement that connects the isomorphism and policy-transfer literatures around a single observed phenomenon.

7.2 Practical Implications for Heritage Policy

The findings carry implications for three audiences. For national heritage authorities designing or revising accreditation, the analysis shows that the strongest convergence pressure comes from the coupling of accreditation to funding, and that the American model exerts a mimetic pull regardless of fit. Authorities can use this knowledge deliberately, borrowing components that suit their setting while resisting the assumption that the most prestigious model is automatically the most appropriate. For the international council, the definition controversy analysed in the case study is a warning. Its normative authority is real but fragile, and the difficulty of agreeing a revised museum definition suggests a need for governance that can accommodate regional and peripheral difference rather than forcing a single global text [86,90]. For individual museums, the spread of standardised criteria raises a familiar risk. Espeland and Sauder showed that organisations reshape themselves to score well on external measures, sometimes at the expense of the goals those measures were meant to serve [33]. As museum accreditation converges on common indicators, the danger of indicator-driven behaviour grows, and the literature on museum purpose and cultural sustainability is a reminder that quality is not exhausted by what an accreditation form can capture [3,49].

7.3 The Convergence-with-decoupling Thesis

The study's central thesis can now be stated in full. Global museum accreditation displays strong convergence at the level of form—shared definitions, comparable criteria, common evaluation procedures, and a single professional vocabulary—accompanied by persistent divergence at the level of enforcement and meaning. This is not a weak or failed convergence. It is convergence of a particular kind, in which a shared architecture is adopted widely while the logic that animates it remains national. The decoupling literature supplies the vocabulary for this pattern, showing that formal conformity and substantive practice can move independently [36], and that the relationship between external demand and internal conduct is partial and interactive rather than total [35]. Recent work cautions against stretching the concept of decoupling too far [37], and the present study respects that caution by treating decoupling not as pervasive hypocrisy but as the specific, observable gap between an internationally shared form and a nationally particular purpose. The thesis distinguishes this account from a naive best-practice diffusion story, in which good models simply spread because they are good. What spreads is the form; what stays is the logic; and the interaction between them is the proper object of study.

7.4 Limitations

Four limitations bound these claims. The comparison rests on five cases, which is enough to expose mechanisms but not to generalise to museum systems in the Global South or in settings not represented here. The analysis relies on English-language scholarship, which understates the depth of Chinese-language and Japanese-language research on those two cases and may flatten their internal complexity. The study offers a synchronic snapshot rather than a longitudinal account, and it cannot say how the contested international definition will settle or how the newer Asian systems will evolve. Finally, the design draws on documentary and secondary sources rather than interviews with accreditation officials, so it captures the formal architecture of these systems more fully than their day-to-day operation. These constraints qualify the findings without unsettling the central comparison.

8 CONCLUSION

8.1 Summary of Findings

This study compared five major museum accreditation systems—the American, English, international, Chinese, and Japanese—through the lens of institutional isomorphism. It found substantial convergence across all five on the vocabulary of the good museum, on standards-based evaluation, on periodic review, and on a shared professional ethics.

It traced this convergence to three mechanisms whose relative strength varies by case. Coercive pressure is strongest where accreditation gates public funding, as in England and China. Mimetic borrowing flows from the older and more prestigious American model toward newer systems. Normative diffusion is carried by the international council's definitions and ethics codes, and is adopted in some form by every national system. It also found that convergence has limits. The two East Asian cases adopt international forms while routing them through distinctive national logics—direct state allocation in China, hybrid professional-state certification in Japan—so that the same architecture serves different ends.

8.2 Future Research Agenda

Several extensions follow naturally. The comparison should be widened to systems beyond the five studied here, including those of the Global South, to test whether the mechanisms identified hold across a broader range of political economies. The contested international definition invites a longitudinal study that tracks how national systems respond as the debate settles over the coming years. A quantitative complement could ask whether accredited museums actually differ from non-accredited ones on measurable outcomes, a question the adjacent literature on hospital and higher-education accreditation has found difficult to answer and which remains open for museums. Finally, the direction of influence deserves attention: future work might examine whether ideas flow back from newer systems toward older ones, for instance whether the social-benefit emphasis prominent in the Chinese framework finds echoes elsewhere.

8.3 Standards as Cultural Sovereignty

Museums are among the most national of institutions, charged with holding and narrating collective memory, yet their quality is now judged against globally converging standards. This is the paradox at the centre of the study. The evidence shows that the paradox is resolved not by the triumph of global standards over national difference, nor by the resistance of national difference to global standards, but by the quiet coexistence of the two. Convergence is real and dominant at the level of form, while national institutional logics persist beneath it. Accreditation systems might best be understood as the operating system of the museum sector: increasingly uniform at the level of shared architecture, while the applications that run upon it remain stubbornly, and perhaps valuably, national. Convergence, in the end, is not the erasure of difference but the common frame within which difference continues to be expressed.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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