

Research Article

Coordinating Across “One Country, Two Systems”: A Case Study of Governance Mechanisms in the 15th National Games

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Abstract

The 15th National Games of the People’s Republic of China, jointly hosted by Guangdong Province, Hong Kong, and Macao in November 2025, represents the first instance in which multiple provincial-level administrative regions co-hosted a National Games under the “one country, two systems” framework. This study asks how cross-system coordination governance mechanisms emerged in such an institutionally asymmetric setting, and what characteristics they exhibited across organizational, regulatory, and resource dimensions. Drawing on collaborative governance theory, the study applies directed content analysis to 47 official policy documents issued between August 2021 and November 2025, yielding 558 coded provisions. The findings identify a governance model best characterized as centrally coordinated, jurisdictionally differentiated, and operationally interconnected. The “1+4” liaison mechanism, the “pre-verification plus closed-loop management” customs model, and an asymmetric resource distribution with Guangdong as the core host and Hong Kong and Macao as specialized nodes constitute the core innovations. The findings extend collaborative governance theory into cross-jurisdictional institutional settings and offer practical implications for future Greater Bay Area cooperation.

Keywords

“One Country, Two Systems”, Cross-System Coordination, Collaborative governance, Mega-sporting events, 15th National Games of China, Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area

1. Introduction

In November 2025, Guangdong Province, together with Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and Macau Special Administrative Region, jointly hosted the 15th National Games of the People’s Republic of China. This is the first time in the history of the

National Games in China that more than one provincial-level administrative region have jointly hosted the games, and it is also the first time for Hong Kong and Macau to be co-hosts of a nationwide sports event. However, the institutional context that surrounded the Games—a context that involved one nation, two systems, three traditional territories, three currencies, and three legal systems (Xie et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2024)—was a significant challenge to conventional forms of governance of sporting events, which always presupposed a uniform governance structure. An examination of the mechanisms through which the Games managed to coordinate across the different systems, therefore, offers a unique case study for governance within institutional asymmetries.

There is very little help that can be found from the literature review for this research question. Over the past few years, various studies have been carried out on the subject of mega-sports events governance, mainly dealing with the politics, society, and management related to mega sports events (Lee Ludvigsen et al., 2022). However, most of these studies are based on a single institutional framework for governance, which does not capture the complexity involved in managing multiple institutional frameworks. The research about the Greater Bay Area has produced significant studies on the economic benefits resulting from synergies (Yang, 2022) and different policy approaches adopted by the three regions (Liu et al., 2025) as well as on different governance practices in the process of regional development (Cheng & Tong, 2025). However, there is still little academic literature discussing the emergence of micro-level coordination practices through mega-events taking place within a limited period of time.

While Wong (2018) demonstrated the analytical value of examining cross-system coordination in environmental governance under “one country, two systems,” that insight has not yet been transferred to the sporting events context. This study addresses these gaps by drawing on collaborative governance theory (Emerson et al., 2012; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015) to construct a three-dimensional analytical framework tailored to the institutional specificities of the 15th National Games. The model considers organizational coordination, which concerns the organizational structure and communication system that binds the three jurisdictions together; regulatory compatibility, which involves the legal and functional linkages that enable regulation to be compatible; and resource allocation, which involves the allocation of financial, physical, and personnel resources across the three jurisdictions. These three are not separate issues but are related to each other and form part of cross-system governance, rather than as isolated coordination problems.

Based on the above discussion, the current study attempts to answer the following research question: under the institutional constraint of “one country, two systems,” what

governance mechanisms have evolved in the process of cross-system coordination of the 15th National Games, and what are the features and patterns of these governance mechanisms in terms of the three defined dimensions? This study uses the method of single case analysis based on the directed content analysis of policies issued from 2021 to 2025. This study contributes to collaborative governance theory by examining its applicability under institutional asymmetry conditions and offers practical insights for future Greater Bay Area cooperation across policy domains.

2. Data and Methods

2.1. Case Selection and Justification

In this study, the methodology of case research is used, which is in line with the guidelines proposed by Yin (2018), as applicable to unique and illuminating cases. The 15th National Games can be considered the first time in the history of the Chinese National Games when more than one province or province-level administrative region with different legal and institutional structures has hosted the Games. In this case, Guangdong Province, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and Macao Special Administrative Region have jointly organized the Games within the structure of one country, two systems, three customs areas, and three currencies. It covers all aspects of a coordination cycle from organizational design to regulation to resource allocation, thus allowing for a thorough study of cross-systemic governance. The three jurisdictions produced a large amount of official documentation before and after the event, which provided a solid empirical basis for analysis.

2.2. Data Collection: Policy Documents from Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao (2021–2025)

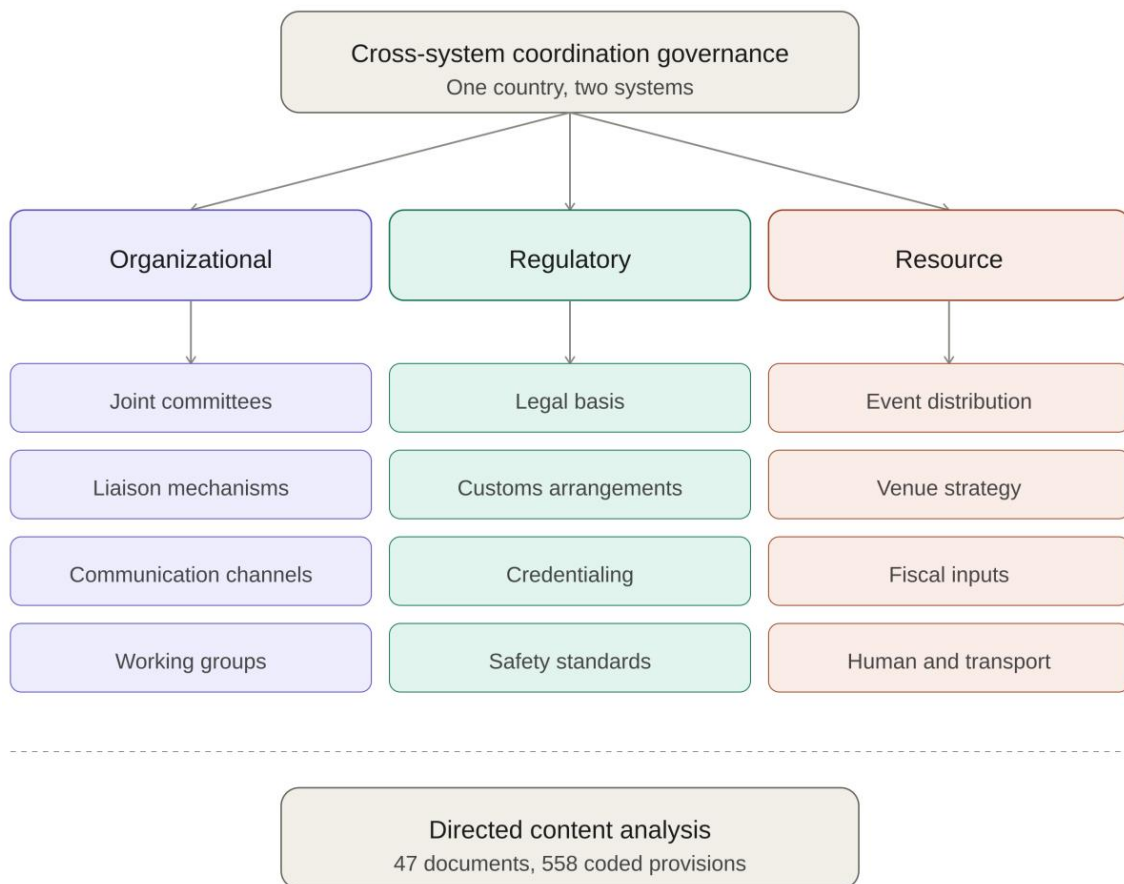
With the scope clearly established, the study then outlined the timeframe for collecting the required data, which was between August 2021, when the State Council endorsed the joint hosting agreement, and November 2025, when the Games took place. There were four categories of sources that formed the data set. These comprised of directives from the State Council and General Administration of Sport at the national level, declarations from the Guangdong provincial government and the executive committee, Hong Kong Legislative Council and National Games Coordination Office bulletins, and orders from the Macao Chief Executive. The collection includes letters of approval, competition guidelines, communications from the organizing committee, minutes of press conferences, agreements on intergovernmental cooperation, and volunteers' work schedules. The total number of documents in the final collection is mentioned in section 3.1.

2.3. Coding Scheme and Variable Operationalization

The coding scheme was constructed using the framework described in the Introduction, which is a three-dimensional framework for analysis. This is shown in Figure 1. Organizational coordination was measured using such categories as joint committee formation, type of liaison mechanism used, frequency of communication, and organization of working groups. The regulatory coordination category was broken down into several subcategories such as the invocation of legal basis, border-crossing customs process, credentialing process of personnel, and safety regulation standardization. Resource allocation was investigated in terms of event ratio distribution, stadium construction process, financial support and sponsorship, volunteer mobilization, and border-crossing transport process. Every document was line-by-line coded, and all related parts were sorted into their respective dimensions and categories.

Figure 1

Analytical Framework and Corresponding Coding Scheme



2.4. Analytical Procedures: Content Analysis with Descriptive Statistics

The analysis employed directed content analysis, using the three governance dimensions as a priori coding directories. Coding was performed by the author, who first established the

operational definitions through an initial reading of ten randomly selected documents, refined the coding scheme inductively, and then applied the finalized scheme across the full corpus on a line-by-line basis. To assess intra-coder consistency, a test-retest procedure was carried out: a randomly selected subset of ten documents was re-coded with a four-week interval between passes, and the percentage agreement between the two passes exceeded 92%, which is considered acceptable for descriptive content analysis. Inconsistencies between the two passes were reviewed against the operational definitions, and the final code was determined through careful re-examination of the provision and the surrounding policy context. Upon completion of coding, descriptive statistics—including frequency counts, proportional distributions, and cross-tabulations across issuing jurisdictions—were calculated to reveal quantitative patterns within each dimension. These statistical summaries were supplemented with qualitative illustrations drawn from representative policy provisions, allowing the findings to capture both the magnitude and the substance of cross-system coordination mechanisms.

3. Results

3.1. Overview of the Policy Document Corpus

The final set of policy texts included 47 policy documents systematically collected from official sources at the four jurisdictional levels responsible for organizing the 15th National Games. These documents were classified according to the issuing body, types of documents, and time period in Table 1 below. National level directives made up 8 documents (17.0%), while documents from Guangdong province made up 17 documents (36.2%). Documents from Hong Kong and Macao amounted to 13 documents (27.7%) and 9 documents (19.1%), respectively. By time period, the issuance of these documents was concentrated in three periods: 11 documents from August 2021 to December 2022; 24 documents from January 2023 to October 2024; and 12 documents from November 2024 to November 2025. Such a pattern shows the increasing collaboration between jurisdictions as the Games drew nearer. Further coding of the texts yielded a total of 558 provisions distributed throughout all three aspects of governance (Table 2), thus providing the empirical basis for the following analysis.

Table 1

Composition of the Policy Document Corpus by Source, Type, and Time Period

Issuing Authority	Documents (N)	Main Document Types	Share (%)	Time Span
National level	8	Approval letters, regulations, communiqués	17.0	2021–2025

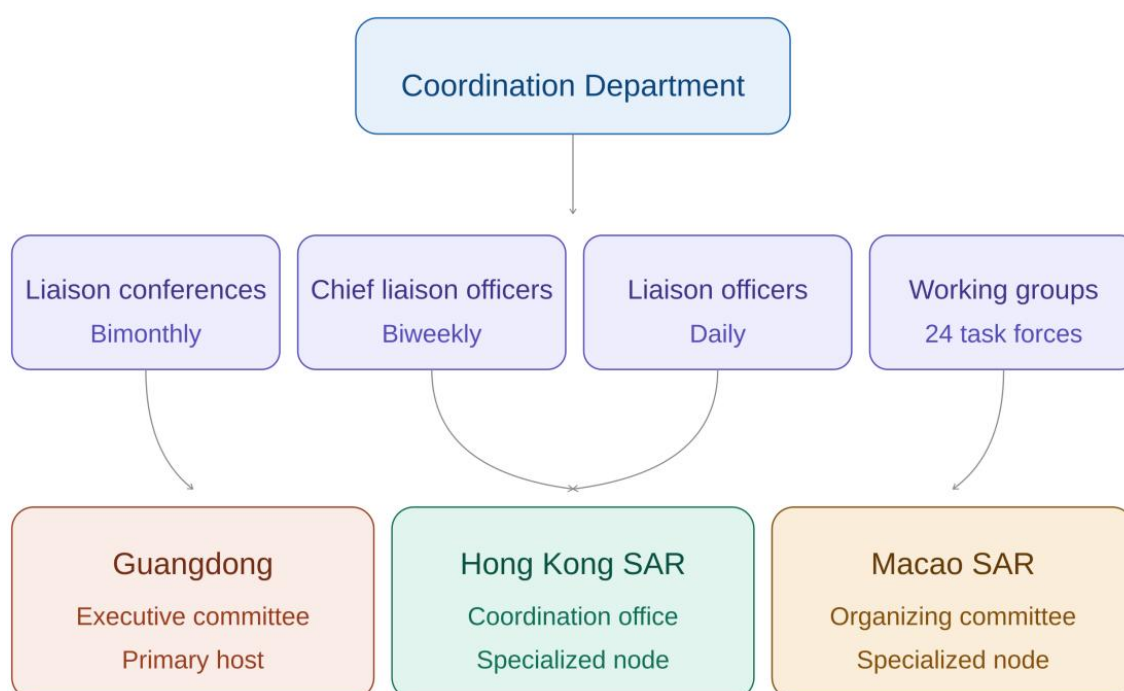
Guangdong Province	17	Executive committee notices, press transcripts	36.2	2023–2025
Hong Kong SAR	13	LegCo papers, coordination office bulletins	27.7	2023–2025
Macao SAR	9	Chief Executive orders, committee records	19.1	2022–2025
Total	47	—	100.0	2021–2025

3.2. Organizational Coordination Mechanisms

Results from code analysis showed that there were 218 provisions related to organization coordination at three different hierarchical levels: country-level apex, inter-jurisdictional coordination level, and regional level. The organizing committee was formally established on April 11, 2024, and the chairman of the committee was the Director of the General Administration of Sport while the vice-chairmen were the governors of Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao. The most distinctive innovation is the “1+4” liaison mechanism. The “1” refers to the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Coordination Department under the national-level Organizing Committee, while the “4” represents four routinized inter-jurisdictional channels: liaison conferences held bimonthly, chief liaison officer meetings every two weeks, daily communication among liaison officers, and twenty-four joint working groups convening on scheduled cycles. Figure 2 illustrates this structure.

Figure 2

Hierarchical Structure of the “1+4” Liaison Mechanism



Each jurisdiction adopted a unique organizational structure at the regional level: the Province of Guangdong set up a Competition Area Executive Committee consisting of eight divisions; Hong Kong set up a Coordination Office under the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau, along with a steering committee and several coordination committees responsible for competition, immigration, security, accreditation, media, medical care, and transportation issues; and the Macao SAR set up an organizing committee headed by the Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture, involving health, security, transportation, and tourism departments. These three jurisdictional structures were vertically coordinated via the “1+4” liaison system, forming a single coordinating body from three separate systems.

Table 2

Coded Findings Across Three Governance Dimensions

Dimension	Coding Categories	Provisions (N)	Share of Total (%)
Organizational coordination	Joint committee formation; liaison mechanism; communication frequency; working group configuration	218	39.1
Regulatory alignment	Legal basis invocation; cross-boundary customs; personnel credentialing; safety standard harmonization	156	28.0
Resource allocation	Event allocation; venue strategy; fiscal & sponsorship inputs; volunteer deployment; cross-boundary transport	184	32.9
Total	—	558	100.0

3.3. Regulatory Alignment Mechanisms

The coding process revealed 156 policy provisions targeting regulatory convergence, which were evenly spread among legal basis references, cross-border customs practices, personnel certification, and safety standards convergence, with the highest frequency found in cross-border customs practices. The legal basis of all regulatory policies referred to the Constitution and Basic Laws of Hong Kong and Macao, thus guaranteeing that new policies did not change the existing legal system but were in line with it. The most innovative cross-system model is the “pre-verification plus closed loop management” customs system, which enables the participants to move through the border points without any “delay, contact, and waiting.” The cyclists were able to pass through the border points six times on the total distance of 231.8 kilometers at a speed of about 40 km per hour without making any stop. The cross-boundary movement reached an exceptional scale, with over 6,000 people travelling

from the mainland to Hong Kong and Macao, and over 3,000 travelling from Hong Kong and Macao to the mainland. Other regulatory developments included the use of the ATA Carnet recognized by all three customs departments, accelerated clearance of doping samples crossing boundaries, and standardization of medical and emergency procedures.

3.4. Resource Allocation Mechanisms

The 184 provisions related to resource allocation cover event allocation, venue strategy, financial input, manpower and regional transportation collaboration. From the statistics presented in Table 3, there was an evident disparity in the distribution of resources, whereby of the total number of 419 competitive sub-events, 366 (87.4%) took place in Guangdong, 39 in Hong Kong (9.3%) and 14 in Macao (3.3%); in comparison to the 166 mass participation events, 152 were in Guangdong, 6 in Hong Kong and 8 in Macao. Of the total number of 105 competition venues in 19 cities, more than 90% were renovated from existing venues. Market development was the key factor behind the creation of sponsorships contracts worth RMB 1.65 billion until mid-2025. Even within the host province of Guangdong, the intentions were to sponsor more than RMB 2.2 billion through 110 organizations. Volunteer mobilization reached approximately 49,500 personnel, distributed across the three jurisdictions: roughly 30,000 “Little Dolphin” volunteers serving the Guangdong host area, approximately 16,000 in Hong Kong, and around 3,500 in Macao. Cross-border transportation witnessed 623 traffic congestion points being cleared, besides infrastructural developments such as Terminal 3 at Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport.

Table 3

Comparative Resource Allocation Across Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao

Resource Indicator	Guangdong	Hong Kong	Macao
Competitive sub-events (N)	366 (87.4%)	39 (9.3%)	14 (3.3%)
Mass-participation sub-events (N)	152 (91.6%)	6 (3.6%)	8 (4.8%)
Host cities (N)	17	1	1
Volunteers deployed (approx.)	~30,000	~16,000	~3,500
Venue construction strategy	>90% retrofitted	Existing & Kai Tak	All existing
Functional role	Primary host	Specialized node	Specialized node

4. Discussion

The research results indicate the existence of a distinctive cross-system coordination governance model formed during the planning and implementation of the 15th National Games. In terms of organization, the hierarchical stratification represented by the national Organizing Committee was combined with the horizontal connections made possible through the “1+4” coordination model, thus forming an architectural design where three systems operate as one coordination network despite maintaining their own individuality. Regarding the regulation model, convergence was not realized through modifying the laws in Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao, but rather through making some operational adjustments, including using the pre-clearance system of customs and accepting the ATA Carnet, which facilitated the creation of flexible interfaces within the Basic Law framework. In terms of the resource dimension, there was an uneven distribution model, where Guangdong is the center and Hong Kong and Macao serve as specialty nodes. Each of the regions contributed based on their respective comparative advantages. Altogether, the three models answer the research question by showing that the Games created a governance model that can be best described as being centrally coordinated, regionally differentiated, and inter-connected.

The findings presented herein contribute to theoretical discussion of collaborative governance. The research detects a “1+4” pattern in intergovernmental interactions that corresponds to the regime-platform-system typology described by Yoon et al. (2022); however, this typology is used in a situation where the collaborating entities are separated not only by their sectoral and hierarchical affiliations but also by their legal and administrative regimes. The institutional difference inherent in the “one country, two systems” approach can be considered a two-edged process. On the one hand, it leads to high levels of coordination costs, which include the bi-monthly liaison meetings, bi-weekly liaison officers meetings, and the twenty-four liaison groups mentioned in the literature. On the other hand, the institution itself has required the creation of new institutions and technologies that would not be needed without such an institution, hence supporting empirically the cross-sector effectiveness proposed by Bauer et al. (2023). Therefore, this particular case serves to not only reinforce collaborative governance theory but also expands on it by showing that institutional diversity can be a productive constraint.

In addition to the theoretical aspect, there is a need for a comparative assessment of the case. While earlier National Games, arranged on a province-by-province basis, did not necessitate discussions among regulatory authorities, the Paris 2024 Olympic Games took

place under one set of laws. The 15th National Games is an example of an event that has no precedent domestically or internationally. In comparison to the cooperation between regions in the Greater Bay Area seen in other sectors, including the slower integration of the environment and economy, as discussed by Wang et al. (2024), an important feature emerges. The time-bound and highly visible nature of mega-events seems to facilitate the creation and utilization of tools for cross-system coordination, which have been difficult to implement in other areas of policymaking. Mega-events thus seem to provide a laboratory for the Greater Bay Area.

These findings have a number of limitations. For one thing, the research focuses only on a single case study. Furthermore, the reliance on formal documents alone might have overlooked the role of informal coordination. But whether or not the “1+4” framework and the pre-event customs procedures will be institutionalized after the event cycle, transforming from ad hoc measures into permanent governance tools, is an empirical issue. For instance, future studies may adopt design frameworks that will compare other National Games events and even other events similar to this one, employ document analysis and interviews that will capture the informal aspects of coordination, and examine diffusion within the Greater Bay Area’s governance process.

5. Conclusion

This research examines the ways in which the 15th National Games constructed an integrated governance system among different systems on the basis of “one country, two systems.” Our results show that organization coordination took place through a hierarchical governance system, with inter-level network based on the “1+4” communication system. Coordination of regulations involved flexible operations that maintained the core systems and facilitated cooperation. As for resource allocation, it was asymmetric, with Guangdong being the main organizer, and Hong Kong and Macao as specialized nodes.

The current research contributes to the theory by utilizing the concept of collaborative governance theory from both intra-system and intersectoral angles within the interjurisdictional framework formed by the concept of “one country, two systems.” The current research suggests that the differences in institutions could serve not only as an obstacle that increases the costs of coordination but also as an innovation driver.

In terms of policy recommendations, the study suggests that the “1+4” liaison arrangement be established as a long-term coordinating tool for the Greater Bay Area, allowing innovations like pre-clearance between territories to be extended to more cross-border uses and maintaining the practice of adapting regulations at an operational level

under the Basic Law in the future cooperation of the Greater Bay Area in other areas.

However, the study is limited by its one-case design, its dependence on policy documents, and the probable exclusion of informal coordination. The future study can be done using comparative case designs where the subsequent National Games and international multiple city games will be taken into consideration, and interviews can also be included in the study and incorporate in-depth interviews to capture the informal dynamics underlying cross-system coordination.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Author contributions

The authors clearly defined the research direction and completed the writing of the entire paper, conducting a thorough exploration of this field.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Data availability

The data are all obtained from publicly available official data.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

Not applicable.

Consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

All authors have given their consent.

Additional information

Received: 28 May 2026

Accepted: 24 June 2026

Published online: 25 August 2026

Publisher's Note



Wisdom Academic Press Ltd. remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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