Review Article

The interplay of social networks and educational capital on the identity of Chinese in Laos: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

The identity of the Chinese diaspora in Laos is undergoing significant transformation, driven by the deepening of China-ASEAN relations and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While the geopolitical context is well-documented, existing sociological literature remains fragmented, often treating social ties and education as separate descriptive domains rather than interacting factors. This systematic review addresses this gap by synthesizing empirical studies published between 2004 and 2025 to construct an integrative framework of identity formation. Following PRISMA guidelines, the study analyzes 38 peer-reviewed publications. The synthesis reveals two core dynamics: (1) Social networks are shifting from traditional "bonding" structures (kinship/hometown) toward "bridging" networks (transnational business/digital), acting as filtering mechanisms for opportunity. (2) Educational capital serves as an empowering tool, accumulated through either Chinese-language cultural socialization or mainstream/international schooling for socio-economic mobility. The study argues that these factors are not independent; rather, social networks shape educational aspirations, while educational capital empowers individuals to reconfigure their networks. This synergistic interplay produces a spectrum of identity practices, ranging from the "Cultural Chinese" to the "Sino-Lao Hybrid" and "Transnational Elite." These findings offer a nuanced, mechanism-based model for understanding how diaspora identities are negotiated in the Global South.

Keywords: Laotian Chinese; identity; social network; educational capital; systematic review; thematic synthesis

1. Introduction

The Chinese community in Laos, though numerically smaller than its counterparts in neighboring nations like Thailand, Malaysia, or Vietnam, occupies a position of unique historical and contemporary significance that compels rigorous academic inquiry. Its trajectory offers a potent case study for understanding diaspora dynamics at the critical intersection of local socio-economic realities and global geopolitical power shifts. The history of this community is not monolithic; rather, it is a stratified sediment

of distinct migratory waves, each embedding a different social and economic layer into the Laotian fabric.

Historically, early commercial traders established foundational networks along the Mekong River, followed by distinct waves of laborers and merchants during the French colonial era who filled specific economic niches left void by colonial administration. However, the most profound transformation has occurred in the contemporary era. Following the Laotian government's adoption of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) in the late 1980s, which opened the country to foreign investment, a new wave of entrepreneurs, investors, and petty traders from mainland China began to arrive[1,2]. This influx created a complex social tapestry within the diaspora, weaving together "old," multi-generational families who are often linguistically and culturally integrated into Lao society, and "new" migrants (xinyimin) whose social, economic, and political orientations are directly and intimately tied to the rising power of the People's Republic of China[3].

This already dynamic situation has been exponentially accelerated by the deepening of China-ASEAN relations and, most pivotally, the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Laos, as a land-locked country transforming into a land-linked hub, has become a focal point of Chinese strategic interest. The inauguration of the China-Laos Railway stands as the most visible and transformative symbol of this engagement—a megaproject that is not merely an economic asset but a powerful agent of social, spatial, and political change[4]. As noted by Xiao et al. (2024)[5], the railway and its associated economic zones have drastically altered physical landscapes, while Rowedder (2024) highlights how these infrastructures act as magnets for a massive influx of Chinese managers, technicians, and service providers[6]. This demographic shift has introduced new layers of complexity, fostering both new forms of collaboration and new social frictions between the diaspora and the host society[7].

In this turbulent context of intensified transnationalism, the question of identity for the Chinese in Laos becomes a paramount strategic resource. Identity, in this setting, is not merely a static cultural attribute or a sentimental attachment to heritage; it is a dynamic mechanism for survival and adaptation. Amidst the competitive pressures of the "China Model" expanding on Lao soil, individuals must navigate their position relative to the Lao state, the local society, and the resurgent economic power of China.

Despite the growing visibility of this community, a comprehensive review of the scholarly literature reveals a significant intellectual gap. Researchers have produced valuable empirical work on specific constituent parts of this picture. For instance, Suryadinata (2024) and Lao (2004) have documented the critical role of Chinese-language education in cultural maintenance[8,9]. Simultaneously, scholars like Baird and Vue (2017) and Bochaton (2015) have mapped the intricate functions of social networks in facilitating cross-border trade and medical mobility[10,11]. However, the existing literature remains characterized by fragmentation. Studies tend to examine education, social networks, or economic integration as separate, isolated domains.

What is conspicuously absent is a systematic synthesis that moves beyond description to construct an explanatory model of the underlying mechanisms at play. We know that social networks and educational backgrounds are important, but we lack a coherent framework for understanding how they interact to co-produce the diverse identity outcomes observed within the community today. Why do some individuals retreat into ethnic enclaves while others become cosmopolitan elites? This review addresses this gap. It seeks to synthesize the disparate evidence from peer-reviewed studies published between 2004 and 2025 to build a robust analytical model of these interacting dynamics.

To deconstruct and analyze the multifaceted processes of identity formation, this review establishes a precise analytical framework built on three core concepts, grounded in sociological theory.

First, Social Networks are defined not simply as a collection of relationships but as structured patterns of relational ties that serve as infrastructure for the flow of resources[12]. Drawing on Granovetter's and Putnam's distinctions, we analyze these networks through the lens of "bonding" versus "bridging" social capital[1]. Bonding social capital refers to the strong, dense, and high-trust ties within homogeneous groups (e.g., kinship, clan, or hometown associations). In the Lao context, these are essential for risk mitigation and cultural preservation[10]. Bridging social capital, conversely, refers to weaker, cross-cutting ties that link individuals across diverse social cleavages (e.g., business associations, transnational professional networks). These are vital for accessing novel information and facilitating integration into the mainstream host society[13].

Second, Educational Capital is conceptualized through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory, understood as the collection of institutionalized cultural resources (credentials, skills, dispositions) acquired through schooling. For the Chinese in Laos, this capital is bifurcated into two distinct forms: "Chinese-language educational capital", which provides access to the ethnic economy and cultural heritage[8]; and "Mainstream/International educational capital", acquired through Lao national schools or overseas universities, which provides the linguistic and credentialing keys for socio-economic mobility and integration into the broader Lao or global market[14].

Finally, Identity is approached from a social constructionist perspective[15]. It is viewed not as a fixed essence but as a fluid, situational negotiation. This review examines identity across multiple dimensions— ethnic, national, and transnational—focusing on how individuals strategically perform different identities to navigate the social fields structured by their network and educational capitals.

Grounded in this tripartite framework, the central research question guiding this review is: How do social networks and educational capital interact to shape the pluralistic identities of the Chinese in Laos?

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Systematic review protocol

To answer the research question with the highest degree of academic rigor, transparency, and comprehensiveness, this study adopts a systematic review methodology. This approach is deliberately chosen over a traditional narrative review to mitigate selection bias and to rigorously synthesize a fragmented, multidisciplinary body of literature that spans sociology, anthropology, geography, and education. The research design is aligned with the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement, ensuring that the selection and analysis processes are explicit and replicable[4]. The protocol follows four discrete steps: (1) a systematic literature search; (2) screening via inclusion/exclusion criteria; (3) standardized data extraction; and (4) qualitative thematic synthesis.

2.2. Literature search strategy

The literature search was meticulously planned to cover the time frame from January 2004 to December 2024. This period was selected to capture both foundational contemporary research (e.g., Lao, 2004)[9] and the surge of scholarship following the announcement and implementation of the BRI in 2013. The search encompassed four major academic databases to ensuring a wide disciplinary net (**Table 1**):

1. Scopus and Web of Science: Selected for their comprehensive coverage of high-impact, peer-reviewed journals in the social sciences.

2. Google Scholar: Utilized to capture a broader range of academic outputs, including significant book chapters and conference proceedings that are often overlooked in citation indexes.

3.   ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: Included to access emerging scholarship and rich empirical data often found in doctoral research.

The search strategy employed robust boolean strings combining three clusters of keywords:

Population: "Chinese", "Sino*", "Overseas Chinese", "Chinese Diaspora".

Geography: "Laos", "Lao PDR", "Lao People's Democratic Republic".

Themes: "Identity", "Social Network", "Capital", "Education", "Integration", "Community".

Table 1. Literature Search Strategy and Results.

Database	Search Strategy Logic	Example Search String (Adapted)	Time Frame	Initial Hits	Duplicates Removed	Final Pre-Screening Count
Scopus	Broad subject coverage for interdisciplinary topics.	(TITLE-ABS-KEY(chinese OR sino*) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(laos OR lao) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(identity OR network OR education OR community))	2004-2024	185	24	161
Web of Science	High-impact, peer-reviewed literature.	TS=("Chinese" AND "Laos") AND TS=("identity" OR "education" OR "network")	2004-2024	112	18	94
Google Scholar	Captures wider range of academic sources including books and chapters.	allintitle: "Chinese in Laos" OR "Sino-Lao"	2004-2024	250	45	205
ProQuest Dissertations & Theses	Access to doctoral research and emerging scholarship.	(abstwo(chinese) AND abstwo(laos)) AND (abstwo(identity) OR abstwo(capital))	2004-2024	48	9	39
Total				595	96	499

Figure 1 depicts the PRISMA selection procedure.
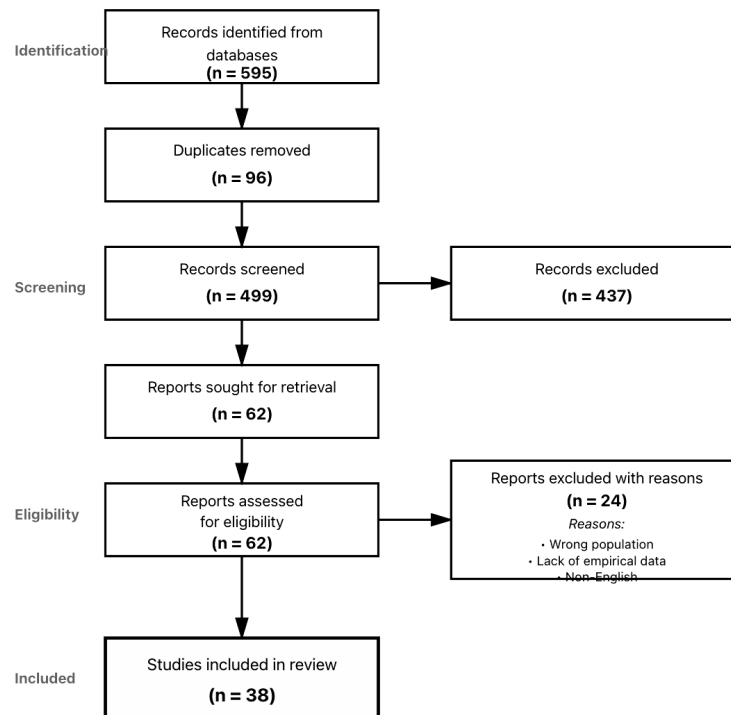
Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the study.

2.3. Screening and selection criteria

After removing 96 duplicates, 499 unique records were screened based on title and abstract. A rigorous set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied to ensure quality and relevance.

Inclusion Criteria: (1) The study's primary focus must be on the Chinese community (migrants or diaspora) in Laos; (2) It must contain original empirical data (qualitative or quantitative) relevant to social networks, education, or identity; (3) It must be a peer-reviewed journal article, book chapter, or dissertation; (4) Published in English.

Exclusion Criteria: (1) Studies focusing solely on short-term tourists or diplomats; (2) Broad regional studies where Laos is only a peripheral mention; (3) Purely technical economic reports without social analysis; (4) Non-academic sources (news, op-eds).

This process resulted in the final selection of 38 studies for synthesis.

2.4. Data extraction and thematic synthesis

Data was extracted using a standardized spreadsheet to capture methodology, sample characteristics, geographical focus, and key findings. The analytical core of the review was a Thematic Synthesis following Thomas and Harden (2008)[16]. This involved three stages:

1. Line-by-line coding: Extracting findings from primary studies (e.g., "parents use WeChat to find tutors").
2. Descriptive themes: Grouping codes into functional categories (e.g., "Digital Bridging Networks").
3. Analytical themes: Generating higher-order constructs that explain the interaction between concepts (e.g., "The Filtering Function of Social Networks"). **Table 2** illustrates this coding framework.

Table 2. Thematic Coding Framework.

First-Order Codes/Raw Concepts (Examples from Literature)	Second-Order Codes/Descriptive Themes	Final Analytical Themes
"Relying on hometown association for jobs" (Baird & Vue, 2017)[10]; "Business partnerships formed along dialect lines" (Tan, 2012)[2]; "Preferential hiring of co-ethnics" (Yen, 2017)[1].	Function of Traditional Bonding Networks	Theme 1: The Evolving Architecture of Social Networks
"Joining WeChat groups for business info" (Loomis et al., 2020)[17]; "Forming cross-ethnic partnerships for construction projects" (Harlan & Lu, 2024)[7]; "Alumni networks" (Langill & Willis, 2020)[14].	Function of Modern Bridging Networks	(Sub-theme: From Bonding to Bridging Dominance)
"Enrolling children in Chinese schools to learn roots" (Suryadinata, 2024)[8]; "Parents prioritize Mandarin proficiency" (Lao, 2004)[9]; "Cultural activities" (Cincotta-Segi, 2014)[18].	Investment in Chinese-Language Education	Theme 2: Differentiated Strategies for Educational Capital Accumulation
"Pursuing degrees at Lao National University for government jobs" (Siharath, 2010)[19]; "Studying in Thailand" (Lertpusit, 2022)[20]; "Seeking scholarships" (Kim Khanh & Ngoc, 2024)[21].	Investment in Mainstream/International Education	(Sub-theme: Hybridization of Educational Pathways)
"Identifying primarily as Chinese, despite Lao citizenship" (Chen, 2022)[22]; "Display of Chinese cultural symbols" (Tan, 2012)[2]; "Observing festivals" (Uy, 2016)[23].	Practice of "Cultural Chinese" Identity	Theme 3: The Pluralistic Practices of Identity Negotiation
"Feeling both Lao and Chinese" (Shah, 2007)[24]; "Code-switching between Lao and Mandarin" (Cincotta-Segi, 2014)[18]; "Acting as intermediaries" (Harlan & Lu, 2024)[7].	Practice of Hybrid Sino-Lao Identity	(Sub-theme: Situational and Strategic Identity Performance)

3. Results

3.1. General characteristics of included literature

The final corpus comprises 38 academic publications. An analysis of their characteristics reveals significant trends in the scholarly landscape. Temporally, there is a marked acceleration in research output: 74% of the included studies (28 out of 38) were published between 2014 and 2024. This surge clearly coincides with the formal announcement of the BRI in 2013, suggesting that academic interest has been spurred by the heightened geopolitical visibility of the Sino-Lao relationship.

Methodologically, the field is overwhelmingly dominated by qualitative research (82%, n=31), utilizing ethnography, interviews, and case studies. While this provides rich, thick descriptions of lived experiences—ideal for analyzing identity—it highlights a scarcity of large-scale quantitative data that could offer statistical generalizability. Geographically, studies are bifurcated: they focus either on the capital, Vientiane (the center

of political and economic power), or on the border regions (sites of intense cross-border mobility), potentially leaving inland rural communities under-examined (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Descriptive Characteristics of Included Studies (Representative Sample).

First Author & Year	Research Focus	Methodology	Sample/Participant Characteristics	Region Focus
Chen, W. K. (2022)[22]	China's diaspora governance and its local reception.	Qualitative	Chinese community leaders, entrepreneurs, officials.	Vientiane, Northern Laos
Suryadinata, L. (2024)[8]	Role of Chinese schools and language in China's soft power.	Qualitative	School principals, teachers, parents.	Vientiane, Pakse
Langill & Willis (2020)[14]	Educational migration and socio-cultural capital.	Qualitative	Lao university students (incl. Sino-Lao) studying abroad.	Laos-Thailand Border
Baird & Vue (2017)[10]	Hmong social networks in rubber cultivation with Chinese traders.	Qualitative	Hmong farmers, Chinese traders.	Northern Laos
Tan, D. (2012)[2]	Business practices and networks of overseas Chinese.	Qualitative	Chinese entrepreneurs ("old" and "new" migrants).	Vientiane
Bochaton, A. (2015)[11]	Cross-border medical mobility and social networks.	Qualitative	Laotian patients seeking healthcare in Thailand.	Laos-Thailand Border
Nokkaew et al. (2023)[4]	Online public opinion on China-led railway projects.	Mixed-Methods	Publicly available social media data.	Laos & Thailand
Kim Khanh & Ngoc (2024)[21]	Factors influencing student mobility to Vietnam.	Quantitative	Cambodian and Laotian students in Vietnam.	Vietnam
Rowedder, S. (2024)[6]	Local engagements with Chinese infrastructure projects.	Qualitative	Villagers, workers, and officials near BRI projects.	Northern Laos
Shah, B. (2007)[24]	Ethnicity as social capital for young Laotian women.	Qualitative	Young women of Chinese-Lao background.	Vientiane
Totals	Primary Themes: Networks (11), Education (12), Identity (9), BRI/Politics (6)	82% Qual.	Samples: Students, Entrepreneurs, Leaders	Focus: Urban (18), Border (12)

3.2. Theme 1: The structure and function of social networks

The synthesis reveals that social networks are the fundamental organizing principle of the Chinese experience in Laos (**Table 4**). However, a significant structural evolution is underway: a shift from the historical dominance of "bonding" social capital toward the increasing necessity of "bridging" social capital.

Traditional Bonding Networks: Historically, and persisting among "old" migrants, networks were built on dense, high-trust ties of kinship, clan, and place of origin (bang). As Tan (2012) vividly illustrates, these networks functioned as essential survival mechanisms in an environment with weak institutional support[2]. They acted as informal credit unions, providing start-up capital for businesses, and as dispute resolution bodies based on reputation. Baird and Vue (2017) similarly note how Hmong and Chinese traders in Northern Laos rely on kinship ties to organize rubber cultivation, creating a closed loop of economic activity[10]. While these networks provide security and solidarity, the literature consistently notes their constraining effect: they can enforce social conformity and insulate members from broader Lao society, reinforcing a segregated ethnic identity.

Modern Bridging Networks: In the BRI era, the landscape has diversified. Bridging networks—instrumental ties connecting individuals across ethnic and national boundaries—have become critical. Harlan and Lu (2024) describe how Chinese infrastructure projects necessitate partnerships between Chinese firms and Lao intermediaries, requiring "weak ties" that can navigate local bureaucracy[7]. Furthermore, digital technology has revolutionized networking. Loomis et al. (2020) highlight the role of WeChat groups, which function as hybrid spaces[17]. These virtual networks allow for the rapid dissemination of business information and the maintenance of transnational family ties, effectively "collapsing" geography and allowing for a more fluid, deterritorialized form of social connection.

Table 4. Synthesis of Findings on Social Network Types, Functions, and Impacts.

Social Network Type	Primary Functions	Capital Form	Reported Impact on Identity	Illustrative Evidence
Traditional Hometown/Clan Networks	Economic mutual aid; Trust enforcement; Cultural preservation; Safety net.	Bonding	Reinforces distinct ethnic identity; Fosters in-group solidarity; Can lead to insularity.	Tan (2012) on dialect-based trust[2]; Baird & Vue (2017) on kinship trade[10]; Chiang & Cheng (2022)[3].
Transnational Business Networks	Access to markets/capital; Navigating bureaucracy; Large-scale coordination.	Bridging	Promotes a pragmatic "Economic Chinese" identity; Requires bicultural competence.	Harlan & Lu (2024) on infrastructure[7]; Yen (2017) on new entrepreneurs[1].
Educational/Alumni Networks	Professional opportunities; Access to elite circles; Social integration.	Bridging	Facilitates socio-economic integration; Can foster a "Sino-Lao Hybrid" identity.	Langill & Willis (2020) on returnees[14]; Siharath (2010) on National University[19].
Online Social Networks (e.g., WeChat)	Rapid information flow; Logistical coordination; Diaspora governance.	Bonding & Bridging	Creates fluid, deterritorialized identity; Connects to state narratives.	Loomis et al. (2020) on info environment[17]; Chen (2022) on qiaoling[22].
Cross-Border Kinship/Service Networks	Accessing services (e.g., medical); Informal trade; Family ties.	Bonding & Bridging	Creates a transnational lived reality tied to borderland regions.	Bochaton (2015) & Durham (2017) on medical mobility[11,13]; Xiao et al. (2024)[5].

3.3. Theme 2: The accumulation and utilization of educational capital

Education emerges from the review not just as pedagogy, but as a strategic site for capital accumulation and identity construction. Families invest in education to position their children within specific social fields (**Table 5**).

The Chinese-Language Pathway: This remains the cornerstone of cultural reproduction. Institutions like the Liaodou Chinese School in Vientiane are not merely schools but cultural hubs. Suryadinata (2024) argues that for many parents, this pathway is about preventing a "cultural rupture," ensuring children retain Mandarin proficiency and Confucian values[8]. However, Lao (2004) and Cincotta-Segi (2014) point out the pragmatic dimension: in the era of the BRI, Mandarin is a high-value economic asset[9,18]. Graduates of these schools are uniquely positioned to act as intermediaries for Chinese capital, reinforcing a "Cultural Chinese" identity that is both sentimental and instrumental.

The Mainstream/International Pathway: Conversely, enrollment in the Lao national education system or international schools is a strategy for integration and mobility. Siharath (2010) and Ogawa (2009) emphasize that a degree from the National University of Laos provides the linguistic fluency and institutional credentials necessary for government employment, fostering a national "Lao" or "Sino-Lao" identity[19,25]. Meanwhile, wealthier families increasingly look abroad. Lertpusit (2022) and Kim Khanh & Ngoc (2024) describe a "Transnational" pathway, where students seek degrees in Thailand, Vietnam, or the West[20,21]. This accumulates "cosmopolitan capital," preparing individuals for global careers and fostering an identity that transcends local ethnic or national categories.

The Hybrid Strategy: A key finding is the rise of a dual strategy. Uy (2016) documents how families meticulously combine Lao schooling (for citizenship and integration) with supplementary Chinese tutoring (for heritage and business)[23]. This conscious effort produces "situational navigators"—individuals capable of code-switching between cultural repertoires, maximizing their flexibility in a volatile market.

Table 5. Synthesis of Findings on Educational Capital Types, Strategies, and Impacts.

Educational Capital Type	Family Investment Strategy	Core Competencies Gained	Reported Impact on Identity	Illustrative Evidence
Chinese-Language Educational Capital	Enrollment in full-time Chinese schools; Tutoring.	Mandarin proficiency; Literacy; Cultural knowledge; Diaspora ties.	Strengthens "Cultural Chinese" identity; Belonging to Greater China.	Suryadinata (2024)[8]; Lao (2004)[9]; Cincotta-Segi (2014)[18].
Lao National Educational Capital	Lao public/private schools; National University degrees.	Lao proficiency; Local cultural/bureaucratic knowledge.	Promotes "Sino-Lao Hybrid" identity; National integration.	Siharath (2010)[19]; Ogawa (2009)[25]; Phetsiriseng (2009)[26].
International Educational Capital	International schools; Study abroad (Thailand/West).	English proficiency; Global credentials; Transnational networks.	Cultivates "Transnational Elite" identity; Cosmopolitan outlook.	Lertpusit (2022)[20]; Kim Khanh & Ngoc (2024)[21]; Uy (2011)[27].
Dual/Hybrid Educational Strategy	Combining Lao/international schooling with Chinese tutoring.	Bilingualism; Bicultural competence; Situational awareness.	Leads to fluid, pragmatic identities; Maximizes capital flexibility.	Uy (2016)[23]; Shah (2007)[24].

3.4. Theme 3: The pluralistic practices of identity

The synthesis refutes any notion of a monolithic Chinese identity. Instead, it identifies a spectrum of identity practices:

1. The Cultural Chinese: Defined by deep immersion in bonding networks and Chinese education. Their primary reference group is the diaspora or China itself.

2. The Economic Chinese: A pragmatic identity prevalent among new entrepreneurs. Ethnicity is performed instrumentally to facilitate trade[1].

3. The Sino-Lao Hybrid: Common among integrated descendants[24]. They are fluently bicultural, celebrating both Lao and Chinese traditions and acting as bridges between the communities.

4. The Transnational Elite: A mobile class defined by international education and global professional status [20]. For them, local national identities are secondary to their professional cosmopolitanism.

4. Discussion: An integrative analysis of the mechanism

4.1. Constructing the interplay

The central theoretical contribution of this review is to move beyond listing these factors to constructing an integrative model of the mechanism through which they interact. The core argument is that identity is an emergent property of the dynamic interplay between an individual's social network portfolio and their educational capital portfolio.

As visualized in **Figure 2** and detailed in **Table 6**, different combinations of capital produce predictable identity outcomes. For example, an individual with high bonding capital (embedded in a clan) who receives only Chinese education is structurally funneled into the role of a "Community Guardian." Conversely, an individual with the same network background who acquires Lao national educational capital gains the agency to bridge out of the enclave, potentially becoming a "Community Intermediary."
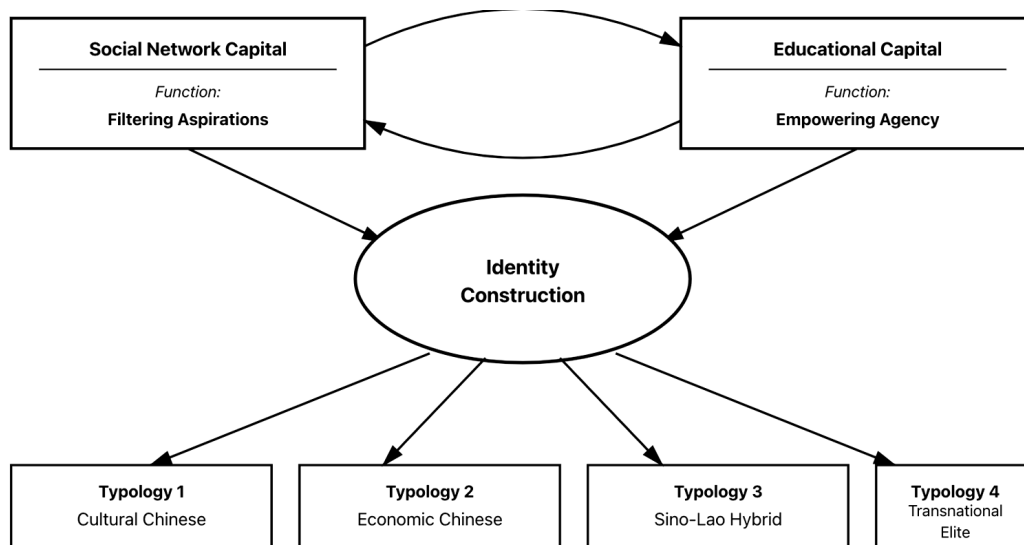
Figure 2. Different combinations of capital.

Table 6. Synthesis Matrix of the Interplay of Social Network and Educational Capital on Identity.

Social Network Capital Portfolio	Predominantly Chinese	Predominantly Mainstream/Lao	Dual / International
High Bonding / Low Bridging (e.g., Worker in ethnic enclave)	"Community Guardian" Strong "Cultural Chinese" identity. Logic: Education reinforces network norms. (Suryadinata, 2024)[8]	"Alienated Local" Potential for marginalization/conflict. Logic: Capital mismatch; skills do not match network. (Cincotta-Segi, 2014)[18]	"Aspiring Transnational" Frustrated ambition. Logic: High skills but lacks bridging ties to activate them. (Uy, 2016)[23]
Low Bonding / High Bridging (e.g., Professional in Lao firm)	"Cultural Broker" Pragmatic, instrumental identity. Logic: Uses culture as a niche asset in mainstream. (Harlan & Lu, 2024)[7]	"Integrated Professional" Strong "Sino-Lao Hybrid" identity. Logic: Full alignment for mainstream success. (Langill & Willis, 2020)[14]	"Cosmopolitan Professional" "Transnational" identity. Logic: Detached from local ethnic constraints. (Lertpusit, 2022)[20]
High Bonding / High Bridging (e.g., Community leader)	"Pragmatic Leader" Flexible, "Economic Chinese" identity. Logic: Mobilizes solidarity for economic gain. (Chen, 2022)[22]	"Community Intermediary" Influential "Sino-Lao Hybrid". Logic: Bridges enclave and state. (Shah, 2007)[24]	"Transnational Elite" Fluid, powerful identity. Logic: Maximum strategic flexibility. (Chiang & Cheng, 2022)[3]

4.2. Elaborating the mechanism: filtering, empowering, and differentiating

The mechanism operates through three specific internal logic functions:

1. The Filtering Function: Social networks do not just provide resources; they shape aspirations. A family embedded in a tight-knit bonding network will filter information about educational choices through the lens of community norms, making Chinese schools seem "natural" and Lao schools "foreign." This pre-selects the trajectory.

2. The Empowering Function: Educational capital provides the tools (agency) to confirm or challenge this trajectory. Acquiring a Lao degree empowers an individual to build new bridging ties that were previously inaccessible to their parents, effectively rewriting their network portfolio.

3. The Differentiating Function: The continuous iteration of filtering and empowering leads to the profound stratification of the community. Over time, these choices harden into distinct identity groups, explaining why the "Chinese community" in Laos is so internally diverse.

4.3. Theoretical implications

This study contributes to diaspora studies by operationalizing Bourdieu and Granovetter in the Global South. It challenges linear assimilation models by showing that integration is not a one-way street but a strategic negotiation of capitals. In the BRI era, "Chineseness" is resourced—it is a form of capital that can be traded. The mechanism model explains how individuals convert this cultural capital into economic survival or transnational mobility.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review, synthesizing 38 empirical studies, has constructed a robust mechanism-based model to explain how social networks and educational capital interact to shape the identities of the Chinese in Laos. The findings confirm that the community is undergoing a structural transformation, shifting from closed, bonding-based survival networks to open, bridging-based opportunity networks. Simultaneously, educational strategies are hybridizing to meet the demands of a transnational economy.

The study concludes that identity is the emergent outcome of the interplay between these forces. Social networks act as filters for educational choice, while education empowers individuals to reconfigure their social worlds. This recursive dynamic differentiates the community into distinct identity practices, from the "Cultural Chinese" to the "Transnational Elite."

Limitations of this review include the reliance on qualitative data, which prevents statistical generalization, and the exclusion of non-English literature. Future research should prioritize: (1) Quantitative validation of the proposed identity typologies through large-scale surveys; (2) Longitudinal ethnographic studies on the "off-diagonal" groups (e.g., the "Alienated Local") to understand the lived experience of capital mismatch; and (3) Investigations into the host society's perspective to understand how Lao attitudes shape these identity negotiations.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, Shumin Dao, Mohd Mahzan Awang, and Jamsari Alias; Methodology, Shumin Dao; Software, Shumin Dao; Validation, Shumin Dao, Mohd Mahzan Awang, and Jamsari Alias; Formal Analysis, Shumin Dao; Investigation, Shumin Dao; Resources, Shumin Dao; Data Curation, Shumin Dao; Writing—Original Draft Preparation, Shumin Dao; Writing—Review & Editing, Shumin Dao; Visualization, Shumin Dao; Supervision, Mohd Mahzan Awang and Jamsari Alias; Project Administration, Mohd Mahzan Awang and Jamsari Alias. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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