



The Construction of Multiple Cultural Identities of Cross-border Inter-marriage Families: A Case Study of Luangnamtha Province Laos and Mengla China

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of multiple cultural identities among cross-border inter-marriage families in Luangnamtha Province, Laos, and Mengla County, China. Situated along the China–Laos border, this region has long been characterized by historical mobility, ethnic continuity, and cross-border kinship networks. In recent years, cross-border marriage has become increasingly common, significantly shaping demographic structures, family life, and identity formation. Using a qualitative case study approach supported by government records from 2018 to 2023, this research analyzes patterns of marriage, gender roles, legal status, and intergenerational experiences within transnational households.

The findings reveal a steady rise in registered cross-border marriages in both regions, with particularly high prevalence among ethnic minority groups such as the Tai Lue, Akha, and Hmong. Most marriages involve Lao women marrying Chinese men, reflecting demographic imbalances and economic disparities between the two areas. After marriage, women typically relocate to China and assume domestic roles, reinforcing traditional gender expectations. At the same time, a large proportion of these women lack secure legal status, limiting their access to citizenship rights, social welfare, and employment opportunities.

The growing number of children born into cross-border families further highlights issues related to nationality, education, and access to public services. Despite these challenges, cross-border households also function as dynamic spaces of cultural exchange, where language, customs, and traditions from both countries are negotiated and blended in everyday life.

This research contributes to broader discussions on transnational families, cultural hybridity, and borderland identity in Southeast Asia. It demonstrates that cultural identity in cross-border contexts is not fixed but continuously constructed through daily practices shaped by both intimate relationships and state structures.

Keywords: Luangnamtha Province; Mengla; cross-border marriage; multiple cultural identities; borderland studies

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1. Introduction

In an era increasingly defined by globalization and mobility, cross-border connections have become a central feature of social life. Movement across national boundaries is no longer limited to trade or temporary migration; it now deeply shapes family formation, social organization, and cultural identity. In regions where historical ties, economic exchange, and shared cultural traditions have long linked communities, cross-border marriages have become more common and socially significant. These unions do not merely connect two individuals; they bring together different languages, belief systems, customs, and social expectations. As a result, families formed across borders become dynamic spaces where culture is constantly negotiated and redefined. Rather than maintaining fixed identities, individuals within such households continuously adapt to multiple cultural influences, reshaping their sense of belonging over time. In this way, cross-border families

serve as important sites for observing how culture operates as a living and evolving process (Glick Schiller et al., 1992). Contemporary understandings of culture increasingly challenge the notion that identity is stable or singular. Instead, culture can be understood as fluid and relational, shaped by ongoing interactions and social contexts. When individuals move across borders or form families that span nations, they encounter different systems of meaning, values, and practices. In cross-border marriages, these encounters become part of daily life. Language use, religious beliefs, gender roles, and social norms may not align seamlessly. Differences in legal systems, educational structures, and citizenship policies can further complicate family life. These everyday negotiations require family members to navigate multiple frameworks of belonging. Over time, this process produces layered and hybrid identities that do not fully conform to any single national or cultural category (Hall, 1996; Vertovec, 2009; Anthias, 2001). Identity in such contexts is not a final outcome but

an ongoing construction shaped by both personal agency and structural conditions.

The border between northern Laos and southern China offers a particularly meaningful setting for examining these dynamics. The area linking Luangnamtha Province in Laos and Mengla County in Yunnan, China, has historically been characterized by mobility, exchange, and interconnection. Long before the establishment of modern nation-state boundaries, communities in this region maintained trade networks, kinship ties, and shared cultural practices. Ethnic groups such as the Dai and Akha, among others, inhabit territories that extend across both sides of the border. Although contemporary state boundaries divide them politically, cultural and social ties continue to connect these communities (Walker, 1999). In this context, cross-border marriage is not a new phenomenon but part of a longer history of regional interaction.

Despite the formal demarcation of national borders, everyday life in the Luangnamtha–Mengla region often transcends state-defined divisions. Families may have relatives on both sides, engage in cross-border trade, or participate in shared cultural festivals. Marriages between villagers from Laos and China occur with relative frequency, reinforcing long-standing networks of kinship and reciprocity. These unions play a crucial role in shaping household economies, social relations, and community structures. They influence patterns of migration, access to resources, and strategies for livelihood. Yet, while such marriages are embedded in local social systems, they are also shaped by national policies concerning citizenship, residency, and legal recognition. Borders may be porous in practice, but they still exert influence through administrative procedures and state regulations (Donnan & Wilson, 2010).

Within cross-border households, identity formation is influenced by both intimate family interactions and broader institutional frameworks. Government policies regarding nationality, education, and social services can shape how families experience belonging. For example, decisions about where children attend school, which language they primarily use, or which nationality they hold can affect their sense of cultural attachment. Community attitudes and social acceptance also play a role. A child born to parents from different countries may be asked to define their origin in ways that highlight difference rather than hybridity. Over time, repeated encounters in schools, markets, and administrative offices contribute to the formation of complex self-understandings. Identity, in this sense, is lived through everyday practices: the language spoken at home, the food prepared for meals, the festivals celebrated, and the stories passed down across generations (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

At the same time, cross-border families often demonstrate resilience and creativity in managing cultural

diversity. Rather than choosing one identity over another, family members may learn to navigate multiple cultural systems simultaneously. Parents may intentionally teach children both languages, celebrate traditions from both sides of the border, and maintain relationships with relatives in two countries. These practices can foster a sense of expanded belonging that challenges rigid national categories. However, this process is not always smooth. Power imbalances, particularly those shaped by gender norms and legal status, can influence whose culture becomes more dominant within the household. Economic disparities between the two sides of the border may also affect family decision-making and mobility patterns. Therefore, examining identity construction within cross-border marriages requires attention to both cultural exchange and structural inequality.

This research focuses on the construction of multiple cultural identities among cross-border intermarriage families in Luangnamtha Province, Laos, and Mengla, China. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study centers on family-level experiences within the borderland context. By prioritizing everyday life inside households, the research moves beyond macro-level statistics on migration or marriage trends. Instead, it seeks to understand how identity is shaped through daily routines, emotional relationships, and practical negotiations. Through in-depth case analysis, the study explores how individuals interpret their own cultural positions and how these interpretations shift over time.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to broader scholarly discussions on transnational families, identity construction, and cultural hybridity. While much literature has examined migration and diaspora communities, less attention has been given to rural borderland regions in mainland Southeast Asia, where mobility and intermarriage are embedded in longstanding historical relationships. By examining the Luangnamtha–Mengla border area, this study highlights how frontier zones serve as spaces of cultural interaction and transformation. Borders do not simply separate nations; they also create conditions for new forms of belonging that combine continuity and change.

Ultimately, this research aims to deepen understanding of how cross-border marriages shape complex cultural identities in the China–Laos border region. It demonstrates that identity in borderlands is neither fixed nor fragmented, but negotiated through everyday practices and influenced by both intimate relationships and state structures. In doing so, the study sheds light on how families living along national boundaries experience and redefine cultural belonging in contemporary Southeast Asia.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data collection

In 2023, existing records formed the basis of this research, pulled straight from government archives. Sourced through administrative channels in Luangnamtha Province, Laos - alongside Mengla in China - the material reflects shared realities between two connected regions. Despite separate nations, these places share a common thread: leadership rooted in Tai Lue tradition, woven tight with enduring bonds of culture, kinship, and daily life across borders. Official documentation offered clear insight into how mixed-nationality households navigate systems, thanks to consistent recordkeeping already in place. Instead of gathering new responses, the work leaned on what was already written down, opening doors to structured facts about family ties and governance routines.

Back in November 2023, getting the needed papers meant reaching out to offices in Luangnamtha Province along with Mengla District. Instead of waiting, messages went back and forth to set up ways to look at internal reports plus stats tied to the study's goals. About a month passed while going through materials from both areas, pulling them together, then sorting everything into order.

From start to finish, care shaped how each piece gathered fit the bigger picture. Those papers tied clearly to the subject made it into review. By following steady steps when pulling together information, trust in what emerged grew naturally. That base turned out strong enough to hold up close description later on.

2.2 Data analysis

This study looked at information through a straightforward summary style. Instead of gathering new facts, it worked with reports in 2023. These sources came from government documents focusing on couples married across borders in Luangnamtha Province, Laos, along with Mengla in China. By sorting and reviewing those materials carefully, key details emerged about family patterns in these areas. With no changes made to the original data, the analysis stayed close to what was recorded. Insights grew naturally from how things were described in reports, showing everyday life and shared customs among mixed-nationality households.

A close look began by spotting habits, shifts, uncommon threads tied to who people feel they are, how homes are built, lives linked across borders. Sorting happened through place markers, when things occurred, what ideas showed up more than once like how unions form or customs live on. What emerged sat inside structured layouts, alongside written summaries, each helping shape clarity without clutter.

3. Result

The findings of this study reveal that cross-border marriage between Mengla County in China and Luangnamtha Province in Laos has become increasingly common over the past decade, generating significant

demographic, social, and familial transformations in both regions. What was once considered a localized or occasional practice has evolved into a central feature of community life along the China–Laos border. The steady rise in cross-border unions reflects broader processes of mobility, economic interdependence, and long-standing ethnic and cultural connections that transcend national boundaries.

In Mengla County, cross-border marriages are particularly prevalent among ethnic minority groups such as the Tai Lue, Akha, and Hmong, whose communities extend across both sides of the border. The research indicates that more than 60 percent of marriages among these minority populations involve partners from Laos. This high proportion underscores the embeddedness of cross-border kinship networks within local social structures. Statistical data further demonstrate a sustained upward trend: up to 2023, the number of registered cross-border marriages in Mengla increased at an average annual rate of 9.2 percent. By 2023, the total number of cross-border married couples had reached approximately 12,000. These couples represented 34.7 percent of families residing in villages located along the China–Laos border, highlighting the central role that cross-border marriage now plays in shaping household composition and community demographics.

A striking feature of these marriages is the pronounced gender imbalance. In Mengla, 91.3 percent of cross-border marriages involved Lao women marrying Chinese men. Following marriage, most of these women relocated to Mengla and became members of their husbands' households. The findings indicate that women in such marriages are generally expected to assume traditional domestic roles. Their primary responsibilities include childcare, caring for elderly parents-in-law, cooking, and managing daily household tasks. Participation in paid employment outside the home is relatively uncommon. This gendered division of labor reflects deeply rooted social norms that prioritize women's roles within the private sphere while limiting their economic independence and opportunities for social mobility. As a result, cross-border marriage in Mengla often reinforces conventional gender expectations rather than transforming them.

A similar pattern is evident in Luangnamtha Province. The number of registered cross-border marriages in the province has also risen steadily, with an average annual growth rate of 7.8 percent over the same period. By 2023, approximately 8,600 registered cross-border married couples were recorded in Luangnamtha. Among these marriages, 82.4 percent involved Lao women marrying Chinese men. Although some men from Laos also marry Chinese women, such cases are comparatively rare. As in Mengla, Lao women who enter cross-border marriages typically relocate and adopt domestic roles centered on

childcare and household management. The consistency of these patterns on both sides of the border suggests that cross-border marriage not only reflects demographic and economic dynamics but also perpetuates traditional gender norms within family life.

The rapid growth of cross-border marriages has also contributed to a significant increase in the number of children born into these families. In 2023, Luangnamtha Province recorded an estimated 15,000 children aged between 6 and 22 years from cross-border marriage households. In Mengla County, the number was even higher, reaching approximately 23,000 children within the same age group. These children represent a substantial and growing segment of the border population. However, their experiences are often shaped by complex issues related to nationality, identity, and access to public services.

Many children from cross-border families face challenges associated with citizenship documentation, school enrollment, language barriers, and eligibility for healthcare and social welfare programs. In cases where one parent lacks secure legal status, children may encounter administrative difficulties in obtaining identity documents or accessing education. Language differences can also affect academic performance and social integration, particularly when children grow up in households where multiple languages are spoken. These challenges highlight the intergenerational implications of cross-border marriage and underscore the need for coordinated policy responses that address the specific needs of these families.

Demographic data provide further insight into the structural factors influencing cross-border marriage patterns. In 2023, Mengla had a total male population of approximately 162,900, compared to about 147,000 females. This notable gender imbalance suggests a surplus of men within the local population, which may contribute to the demand for marriage partners from across the border. Factors such as migration patterns, historical population policies, and socioeconomic conditions may have shaped this imbalance. In contrast, Luangnamtha Province had a total population of 68,190 people, including 34,279 men and 33,911 women. The relatively balanced gender distribution in Luangnamtha indicates that demographic pressures differ between the two regions. This contrast helps explain why cross-border marriages predominantly involve Lao women marrying Chinese men rather than the reverse.

Beyond demographic and social patterns, the research highlights serious legal and institutional challenges faced by Lao women who migrate to China through marriage. Among Lao women married to Chinese men and residing in Mengla, only 3.8 percent had successfully obtained Chinese nationality, along with the associated legal rights and protections. The overwhelming majority 96.2 percent had not acquired Chinese citizenship. This lack of legal status places many women in a

vulnerable position. Without citizenship or long-term residency rights, they may experience restricted access to public healthcare, social insurance, formal employment opportunities, and legal protection in cases of marital conflict or domestic violence.

The absence of secure legal recognition also affects women's long-term wellbeing and social integration. Limited language proficiency and unfamiliarity with administrative procedures can further compound their marginalization. In some cases, women may rely heavily on their husbands or in-laws for financial support and legal representation, reinforcing unequal power dynamics within the household. The precarious legal situation of many Lao women illustrates how cross-border marriage intersects with broader issues of migration governance, gender inequality, and social protection.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that cross-border marriage has become a defining feature of social life in the Mengla–Luangnamtha border region. It significantly shapes demographic structures, reinforces gendered divisions of labor, and contributes to the growth of a new generation of children with complex cultural and legal identities. At the same time, the phenomenon exposes structural inequalities, particularly in relation to women's legal status and access to rights. These results underscore the importance of developing bilateral cooperation mechanisms and inclusive social policies that address the demographic realities and social vulnerabilities associated with cross-border marriage in this borderland context.

4. Discussion

The findings of this research demonstrate that cross-border marriage has become a significant and growing social phenomenon along the China–Laos border, particularly between Mengla, China and Luangnamtha Province in Lao PDR. The steady annual increase in registered cross-border marriages in both locations reflects broader structural forces, including demographic imbalance, economic disparity, cultural proximity, and mobility across porous borders (International Organization for Migration, 2019; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). The higher growth rate observed in Mengla compared to Luangnamtha suggests that demand for cross-border marriage is especially strong on the Chinese side, likely driven by local gender imbalances in rural and border regions (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023; Zhang & Fan, 2016).

One of the most notable findings is the strong gendered pattern of cross-border marriage. In both Mengla and Luangnamtha, the overwhelming majority of cross-border marriages involve Lao women marrying Chinese men. This pattern aligns with previous research indicating that women from economically less-developed areas are more likely to migrate through marriage to neighboring countries with greater economic opportunities (UNDESA, 2020; UN Women, 2018). However, while marriage

migration may offer short-term economic security, the results indicate that it often reinforces traditional gender roles. After marriage, most women are expected to remain at home, care for children, and support their husbands' families, limiting their participation in education, employment, and public life. Similar gendered outcomes of marriage migration have been widely documented in studies across East and Southeast Asia (UN Women, 2018; World Bank, 2021).

The demographic data further supports the structural explanation for cross-border marriage. Mengla exhibits a clear imbalance between male and female populations, whereas Luangnamtha shows a relatively equal gender distribution. Such gender imbalances in China, particularly in rural and border areas, have been widely identified as a key driver of marriage migration, as shortages of local women increase the demand for foreign spouses (Zhang & Fan, 2016; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023). In contrast, the more balanced population structure in Luangnamtha suggests that cross-border marriage there is less about partner shortage and more about economic strategy and social mobility for women and their families (International Organization for Migration, 2019).

The growing number of children from cross-border marriage families raises additional concerns. Tens of thousands of children in both regions are growing up in transnational households, often facing challenges related to nationality, household registration, access to education, and healthcare (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). These challenges may be particularly acute when mothers lack legal residency or citizenship status, which can limit children's access to public services. Without clear legal frameworks and effective bilateral coordination, these children risk long-term social exclusion and reduced human capital development (World Bank, 2021).

A critical issue highlighted by this research is the legal vulnerability of Lao women residing in China. The fact that only a small proportion of women have obtained Chinese nationality underscores the precarious position of marriage migrants. Lack of citizenship restricts access to social welfare, employment protections, and legal recourse, increasing women's dependence on their spouses and families (UN Women, 2018). This dependency can heighten the risk of exploitation, marginalization, and limited autonomy. The findings suggest that cross-border marriage, while socially accepted and increasingly common, has not been matched by adequate institutional support or legal protection mechanisms (International Organization for Migration, 2019).

Overall, the discussion points to a contradiction at the heart of cross-border marriage practices. On one hand, such marriages help address demographic gaps, strengthen cross-border relations, and support rural family formation.

On the other hand, they reproduce gender inequality and expose women and children to legal and social risks (World Bank, 2021; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). These findings highlight the need for stronger bilateral cooperation between China and Laos, particularly in the areas of marriage registration, nationality law, social services, and child protection. Policies that improve women's legal status, expand access to education and employment, and safeguard children's rights are essential for ensuring that cross-border marriage contributes to equitable and sustainable development rather than reinforcing vulnerability.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, cross-border marriage between Mengla and Luangnamtha has become a widespread and influential social phenomenon that reflects the increasing interconnectedness of border communities. Driven by geographic proximity, economic differences, and demographic imbalances, these marriages play a significant role in shaping social and family structures on both sides of the border. On one hand, cross-border marriage helps address population imbalances, particularly in rural areas where gender ratios may be uneven. It also strengthens social, economic, and cultural ties between the two regions, fostering closer cross-border relationships and regional integration.

However, despite these positive contributions, cross-border marriages also raise important social concerns. Issues such as gender inequality, insecure legal status, limited access to public services, and economic vulnerability continue to affect many women and children within these families. Some women may face challenges related to citizenship documentation, property rights, healthcare access, and educational opportunities for their children. These vulnerabilities highlight the need for stronger bilateral cooperation, clearer legal frameworks, and more inclusive social protection policies to ensure that cross-border marriage families are not marginalized (SAITHIBVONGSA et al., 2025).

Furthermore, cross-border marriage contributes significantly to cultural integration. Through daily interaction and shared family life, couples and their communities exchange language, food traditions, customs, festivals, and lifestyles. This cultural blending not only enriches local traditions but also promotes mutual understanding, tolerance, and social cohesion across borders.

Overall, while cross-border marriage presents both opportunities and challenges, its growing prevalence underscores the importance of balanced policies that protect individual rights while recognizing its role in promoting cross-border connectivity and cultural exchange.

6. Conflict of interest

We certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

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