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A Study on the Motivation of Lao Students to Learn Chinese in a Non-Target Language Learning Environment: A Case Study of Soochow University in Laos

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Abstract

With globalization and the growing number of Chinese learners worldwide, second language acquisition has become a key focus in Chinese international education. Learning motivation is a critical factor in this process; however, empirical research on the motivation of Lao students to learn Chinese remains underexplored. This study sought to investigate the characteristics and factors of Lao students' motivation to learn Chinese through a mixed-methods approach, including questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Data were collected from 120 learners at Soochow University in Laos, with 12 participants engaging in interviews. Analysis methods included thematic analysis and analysis of variance. The findings revealed that (1) most students demonstrated beginner to intermediate proficiency, with short learning durations and vocabulary challenges; (2) statistical analysis showed a significant correlation between age and motivation ($P = 0.003$), while Chinese proficiency levels, gender, and other factors had no significant impact ($P > 0.05$); (3) Semi-structured interviews further revealed varied motivational orientations among learners in educational and professional contexts. Based on these findings, the study offers practical recommendations, including optimizing classroom instruction, enriching extracurricular activities, and enhancing cross-cultural teaching skills, to better support Chinese language learning in non-target language environments.

Keywords: *Non-Target Language Learning Environment, Chinese Learning Motivation, Lao Students, Learning Influencing Factors, Cross-Cultural Teaching Strategies*

Introduction

By the end of 2020, more than 180 countries and regions worldwide had launched Chinese language education programs, with over 20 million people learning Chinese. As neighboring countries, China and Laos maintain extensive economic and cultural exchanges. With the rise of China's tourism industry and the increasing business investments in Laos, particularly under the "Belt and Road" initiative, the demand for Chinese language proficiency has grown significantly. Currently, Chinese language teaching institutions in Laos primarily include Chinese schools, Confucius Institutes, higher education institutions, and public primary and secondary schools (Suryadinata, 2024).

Table1. Statistics on the Number of Chinese Teaching Institutions and the Number of Students in

	Institution	Quantity	Number of Students
1	Chinese Schools	11	11,530+ (as of 2021) Source: Chinese Embassy in Laos, "Statistics on the Profile of Chinese Language Schools in Laos," November 2020.
2	Confucius Institutes and Classrooms	3	16,356 (2018–2022) Source: (Confucius Institute, 2022)
3	Higher Education Institutions	4	464 (as of 2021) Source: Soochow University Confucius Institute: "Statistics on Chinese Language Programs in Higher Education Institutions in Laos," November 2021.
4	Public Primary and Secondary Schools	10,188	128,400 (as of 2021) Source: Ministry of Education and Sports of Laos: "Overview of Public Primary and Secondary Schools in Laos for 2021," June 2021.
5	HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) Test Centers	3	18,000+ (2011–2021) Source: Chinese Testing Service Network (www.chinesetest.cn), February 2022.

Despite the growing interest in learning Chinese in Laos, research on the motivations for learning Chinese in underdeveloped regions (particularly Laos) remains limited. Existing studies are insufficient to address the unique challenges faced by Lao Chinese learners and their educators. This study focuses on the specific context and needs of Lao Chinese learners, analyzing the motivational characteristics and influencing factors of Lao students learning

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Chinese, with an emphasis on the learning process in a non-target language environment.

Using a combination of questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews, this study aims to provide a scientific basis for second language teaching and learning through a comprehensive analysis of second language learning motivation, promoting learners' active engagement and sustained investment. In this research, we will focus on the following questions:

Q1: What are the main characteristics of Lao Chinese learners' motivation to learn Chinese in a non-target language environment?

Q2: How do factors such as learners' age, gender, personality, duration of study, and Chinese proficiency influence learning motivation?

Q3: Based on empirical research, how can Lao students' motivation to learn Chinese be effectively stimulated and sustained in a non-target language environment?

The research and analysis of these questions are of great significance for exploring second language learning motivation in depth, optimizing teaching practices, and improving learning outcomes.

Literature Review and Theoretical Modeling

Second language learning motivation is a critical variable influencing language learning outcomes, playing a pivotal role in the initiation, maintenance, and optimization of learning behaviors. In recent years, motivation research has gradually shifted from simple theoretical models to more complex multidimensional analyses, encompassing diverse cultural contexts and learning scenarios. Based on relevant literature, this paper analyzes the theoretical frameworks and research progress of second language learning motivation, explores its application in non-target language environments, and proposes directions for future research.

Learning Motivation in Second Language Acquisition

Learning motivation refers to the intrinsic or extrinsic force that drives individuals to engage in learning activities, sustain learning behaviors, and direct them toward specific goals. It is a crucial psychological factor in the learning process, encompassing aspects such as cognition, emotion, and behavioral intention. This study is grounded in two classic theories in the study of second language learning motivation: Dörnyei's three-level motivational framework and Gardner's instrumental and integrative motivation theory.

Dörnyei's Three-Level Motivation Theory serves as a significant theoretical framework in second language learning motivation research (Li & Zhou, 2023). He divides learning motivation into three interrelated components:

The Language Level focuses on learners' interest in the target language, its practical value, and its socio-cultural significance. Learners may develop motivation due to the professional value of the target language, globalization trends, or cultural interest. The Language Level emphasizes the value of the language and its cultural appeal. Studies have shown that factors such as cultural identity and career planning have a direct impact on learning motivation (Yang & Chanyoo, 2022).The Learner Level highlights learners' personal traits and psychological factors, including confidence, self-efficacy, and anxiety levels. Learners with stronger self-drive tend to demonstrate greater persistence and effort in their learning (Saito et al., 2018).The Learning Situation Level focuses on the classroom environment, the role of teachers, teaching methods, and peer influence. For example, whether task designs are engaging or whether teachers provide supportive feedback can significantly affect the maintenance of motivation. Research indicates that integrating task-based teaching with cultural elements can significantly enhance learning interest(Ruan et al., 2015).These three levels collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of language learning motivation. In particular, the dynamic influence of the learning situation makes this framework highly practical for educational applications.

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The Instrumental and Integrative Motivation Theory proposed by Gardner and Lambert is an early foundational model in the study of language learning motivation. It analyzes motivation primarily based on the functions of the language and the goals of learning. Instrumental Motivation refers to learning a language to achieve practical goals, such as passing exams, obtaining job opportunities, or meeting immigration policy requirements. The purpose of learning is usually short-term and extrinsic, aiming for specific achievements or benefits. For instance, instrumental motivation is particularly prominent in short-term goal achievement, such as career development or academic needs (Kosovich et al., 2017).

Integrative Motivation refers to learning a language to integrate into the target language community, establish connections with native speakers, or appreciate the culture of the target language. Research shows that this type of motivation can support long-term language learning and cultural identification (Hegedűs, 2020). This motivation tends to be more enduring and profound, reflecting learners' interest in the language and culture and their sense of identification with the target society.

According to this theory, integrative motivation is more likely to support long-term language acquisition, whereas instrumental motivation is more suited for achieving specific goals. Moreover, in cross-cultural learning contexts, instrumental and integrative motivations often work together, with their specific manifestations varying according to learners' cultural backgrounds and language environments (Mkize & Chisoni, 2015). At the same time, in non-target language environments, the differences in the understanding and expression of instrumental and integrative motivations among learners from different cultural backgrounds require more systematic exploration (Xu & Moloney, 2019).

The Importance of Learning Motivation in Non-Target Language Environments

Non-target language environments pose unique challenges to language learning, such as a lack of opportunities for authentic language interaction and limited learning resources. However, research has shown that task-based teaching methods incorporating cultural elements can compensate for environmental disadvantages, enhancing learners' interest and engagement (Ruan et al., 2015). Although numerous studies have revealed the diversity of learning motivations and their influencing factors, there remain unresolved issues. Dörnyei and Gardner's theories each have strengths in explaining the origins of motivation, but their integration in application requires further development.

Existing research indicates that many factors influence second language learning motivation. These include demographics (e.g., gender, age, educational background, and profession), language proficiency, learning duration, personality traits, as well as the design of teaching strategies. Incorporating cultural elements into task-based teaching can effectively stimulate beginners' intrinsic motivation, while supportive feedback and reward mechanisms in teaching can significantly enhance instrumental motivation (Mkize & Chisoni, 2015). Additionally, research highlights the importance of inclusive learning environments and the critical role of teachers (Wen, 1997). However, there are fewer studies on Laos, and this study will further explore the effects of the above factors on Lao Chinese learners through a mixed research approach.

Methodology

Questionnaire Survey

Questionnaire Design. The purpose of the questionnaire survey is to understand the relationship between second language learning motivation and learning outcomes, as well as to explore the motivational characteristics of different types of learners through quantitative data. The questionnaire design is based on Dörnyei's Three-Level Motivation Theory and Gardner's Instrumental and Integrative Motivation Theory, tailored to the specific characteristics of the target country. It is also translated into a Lao version by a Lao teacher specializing in Chinese to accommodate students with different levels of Chinese language proficiency. To ensure the scientific validity of the tool, reliability and validity tests were conducted. The questionnaire consists of two sections: Basic Information and Learning Situation (18 items). This section includes questions about age, gender, occupation, challenges in learning Chinese, and overall evaluation of Chinese language classes. Learning Motivation (15 items): This section includes Likert scale questions (e.g., "I study Chinese to obtain a scholarship"). The question types

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are primarily single-choice and Likert scale questions (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Design of Semi-Structured Interviews. The semi-structured interviews aim to explore individual learning motivations and experiences in greater depth, addressing details that the questionnaire survey may not fully capture. These interviews provide supportive and interpretative material for the quantitative data. The Interview outline is designed based on the research objectives and focuses on areas such as learning motivation (e.g., "What are your reasons for learning Chinese?"), current learning status (e.g., "Are you facing any difficulties in your current learning?"), and future plans (e.g., "What are your plans for future Chinese learning or career development?"). The outline is flexible, allowing follow-up questions based on the participants' responses (e.g., "Does your family support your Chinese learning?").

Implementation of Interviews. Twelve representative learners were selected from the questionnaire respondents, covering a variety of ages, proficiency levels, and social identities. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with translation provided by teachers who have years of experience in Chinese language teaching and are proficient in both Chinese and Lao. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed and pleasant environment. To ease participants' nervousness, the interviews usually started with light and cheerful topics, such as recommending local tourist attractions to Chinese visitors. Interviewers paid close attention to the participants' comfort and allowed them the freedom to elaborate on their answers.

Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS 25.0 software. First, data from Excel were imported into SPSS for error-checking and corrections. Reliability analysis (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.729) and validity analysis (KMO = 0.643) were performed, both meeting statistical analysis standards. Factor analysis was then conducted, and items unsuitable for factor analysis were removed. After factor analysis, the total variance explained was 64.978% (>50%), indicating suitability for dimensionality reduction.

Apart from one item ("Chinese is difficult," "I see learning Chinese as a challenge," "I feel a sense of achievement when mastering Chinese") scoring 0.472, most values ranged from 0.7 to 0.9, indicating internal consistency among variables. Ultimately, the 15 items were categorized into five types of motivation: learning situation, task-based, cultural interest, personal hobbies, and language utility.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the basic characteristics of the sample, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. ANOVA was applied to compare the relationships between multiple samples and learning motivation, such as age, Chinese proficiency, and learning duration. An independent sample t-test was used to compare the differences in motivation between two sample groups, such as gender.

About Interview Data, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 Chinese learners, covering primary and secondary school students, university students, and employees from enterprises and institutions. The gender ratio was balanced. The interviews, lasting approximately 30 minutes, focused on three main themes: learning motivation, current learning status, and future plans.

A thematic analysis was conducted on the interview content. First, I performed open coding on the transcripts to identify core themes (e.g., learning motivation, learning difficulties). Subsequently, the codes were organized into categories related to learning motivation (e.g., learning situation, task-based). Given the small sample size of the interviews, key sentences in the transcripts were manually annotated, and the frequency and distribution of themes were organized using Excel.

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Results

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Table 2 illustrates the current Chinese learning status and future plans of the participants. Regarding Chinese proficiency, 77.78% of the learners are at Level 3 or below. Additionally, 61.11% of the participants have been learning Chinese for less than six months, with only a few learners studying for more than one year, indicating that most learners are at the beginner stage. Most Chinese learners dedicate 1 to 2 hours per day to studying Chinese after class, showing limited time investment. Lao Chinese learners prefer to learn Chinese through media such as films and TV, favoring a relaxed and enjoyable approach to learning. Over 94% of the students expressed a strong willingness to continue learning Chinese after graduation, demonstrating high motivation and strong learning intentions. In terms of willingness to take Chinese proficiency exams, most participants had not taken such exams, which may be related to their learning objectives. Most learners have clear career plans, aiming to continue studying Chinese or pursuing careers related to Chinese (e.g., research, trade, or translation), reflecting the practical value of learning Chinese.

Table 2. Current status and future plans of Chinese language learning

Item	Category	Number	%
Chinese Language Level	Leve1 1	34	31.48%
	Level 2	28	25.93%
	Level 3	22	20.37%
	Level 4	24	22.22%
How long have you been learning Chinese	Less than 6 months	66	61. 11%
	6 months - 1 year	34	31.48%
	More than 1 year	8	7.41%
How long do you study Chinese every day after class?	0h	8	7.41%
	1h—2h	64	59.26%
	2h—3h	17	15.74%
	3h	19	17.59%
Other ways to learn Chinese	Hire a tutor	4	3.70%
	Watching Chinese TV, movies, surfing the web	67	62.04%
	Chat with friends	18	16.67%
	Read books	19	17.59%
What do you want to do after graduation?	Continue to study Chinese and do Chinese language research Don't want to do anything related to Chinese language	50	46.30%
	Work as a Chinese teacher or translator	8	7.41%
	Work in foreign trade	44	40.74%
	Not to do any work related to Chinese language	6	5.56%
Will you continue to learn Chinese in the future?	No	6	5.56%
	Yes	102	94.44%
Have you participated in any Chinese proficiency tests or competitions?	No	93	86. 11%
	Yes	15	13.89%

Overall, Lao Chinese learners are primarily beginners, adopt flexible learning methods, and, despite lacking depth and systematic approaches in their studies, have clear career goals and strong learning intentions.

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Table 3. Chinese Classroom Experiences and Preferences

Item	Category	Number	%
What kind of class do you prefer?	Teacher speaks, students listen	30	27.78%
	Discuss in small groups	8	7.41%
	Speaking on the stage by themselves	10	9.26%
	Teacher and students quiz each other	60	55.56%
What is the most difficult thing to learn in a Chinese class?	Grammar	29	26.85%
	Pronunciation	18	16.67%
	Vocabulary	56	51.85%
	Chinese characters	5	4.63%
What is your purpose of learning Chinese?	Improve reading skills	5	4.63%
	Achieve excellent HSK scores	11	10. 19%
	Understand Chinese culture	3	2.78%
	Communicate fluently in Chinese	89	82.41%
What would you like your Chinese teacher to add in the classroom?	Games	29	26.85%
	Compete in groups	31	28.70%
	Enjoy Chinese movies	48	44.44%
What do you like about Chinese lessons?	Chinese is easy and fun.	4	3.70%
	Chinese teachers are good.	30	27.78%
	Chinese language is important.	47	43.52%
	I must learn Chinese well.	7	6.48%
Why don't you like Chinese lessons?	Classes are too difficult and confidence is low	36	33.33%
	The time schedule is not reasonable	19	17.59%
	Teachers teach in a single way.	0	0.00%
	Single homework after class, boring class	16	14.81%
	Too busy with work or time.	37	34.26%

Table 3 reflects the learning status, habits, and future plans of Chinese language learners, revealing the following key points: Over 50% of the students prefer teacher-student interactive classrooms, indicating a high demand for classroom interaction. Vocabulary is identified as the primary challenge for Lao Chinese learners, followed by grammar, highlighting these two areas as key difficulties that require special attention from Chinese language teachers. More than 80% of the students stated that their primary goal in learning Chinese is "to communicate fluently in Chinese," far surpassing other objectives. This shows that learners prioritize the communicative function of the language and have clear learning goals. Regarding course design, learners favor lively and engaging classroom formats, suggesting that diversified classrooms are more appealing to students. As for the reasons behind their preference for Chinese language classes, students highly value Chinese learning and show great respect for their teachers. However, practical constraints such as limited study time and the inherent difficulty of learning Chinese significantly affect students' learning experiences.

In conclusion, the survey reveals that students hope for more likely and engaging Chinese course designs, showing a preference for interactive, interesting, and practical teaching methods. This also provides insights for Chinese language teachers, emphasizing the need to balance difficulty and flexibility in teaching design to enhance the learning experience and outcomes.

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Analysis of Variance

This section explores the differences in students' motivation based on internal factors such as age, personality, gender, learning duration, and Chinese proficiency, using the questionnaire data. The analysis was conducted on 108 participants using SPSS 25 software. To determine whether gender and personality show significant differences in learning motivation, an independent samples t-test was applied. For the relationships between age, learning duration, and Chinese proficiency with learning motivation, a one-way ANOVA test was used.

Table 4. ANOVA Analysis of Different Age Groups and Motivation Sum Scores.

ANOVA							
Motivation Sum							
			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance (p-value)
Between Groups			595.827	3	198.609	4.876	0.003*
	Linear Component	Unweighted	35.095	1	35.095	0.862	0.355
		Weighted	311.419	1	311.419	7.645	0.007
		Deviation	284.408	2	142.204	3.491	0.034
Within Groups			4236.173	104	40.732		
Total			4832	107			

Results from the one-way ANOVA analysis indicate that learning motivation varies significantly across different age groups ($P = 0.003$, $P < 0.05$). Among the age groups, the 10-16 age groups showed the lowest motivation levels, while the 24-30 age group demonstrated the highest motivation intensity. High motivation in this age group is mainly due to career pressure or the need to find a job.

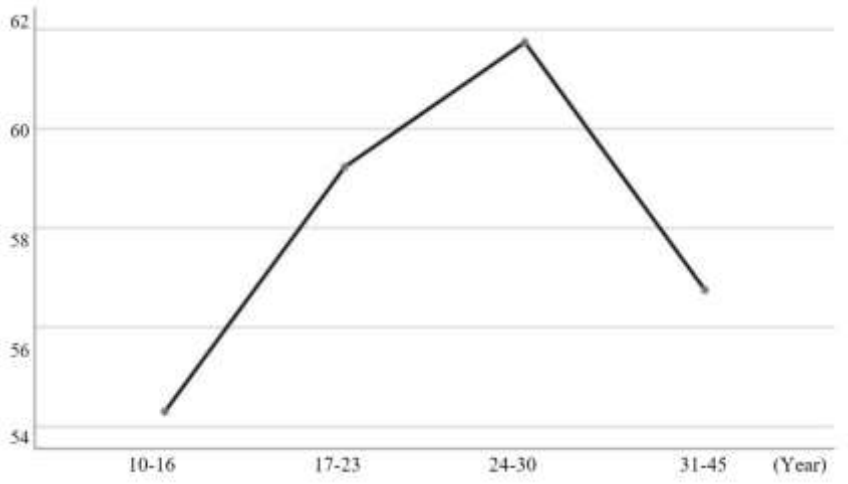

Figure 1. Line Chart of Motivation Sum Means for Different Age Groups.

There was no significant difference in learning motivation across different Chinese proficiency levels (HSK levels) ($P = 0.415$, $P > 0.05$). However, from the mean scores, intermediate-level students (HSK Levels 2-3) exhibited stronger task-oriented motivation, while students at Levels 1 and 4 showed slightly lower motivation.

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Table 5. ANOVA Analysis of Chinese Proficiency and Motivation Sum Scores.

ANOVA					
Motivation Sum					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance (p-value)
Between Groups	129.968	3	43.323	0.958	0.415
Within Groups	4702.032	104	45.212		
Total	4832	107			

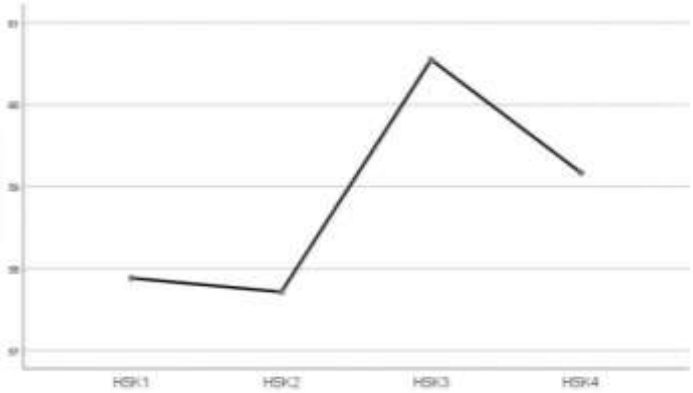

Figure 2. Line Chart of Chinese Proficiency and Motivation Sum Means

The duration of Chinese learning was positively correlated with motivation intensity, though the difference was not statistically significant (P = 0.206, P > 0.05). Students who had studied for more than one year demonstrated the highest motivation intensity in cultural interest and self-driven hobbies, while those who had studied for less than six months displayed stronger task-oriented motivation.

Table 6. ANOVA Analysis of Different Study Durations and Motivation Sum.

ANOVA					
Motivation Sum					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance (p-value)
Between Groups	143.258	2	71.629	1.604	0.206
Within Groups	4688.742	105	44.655		
Total	4832	107			

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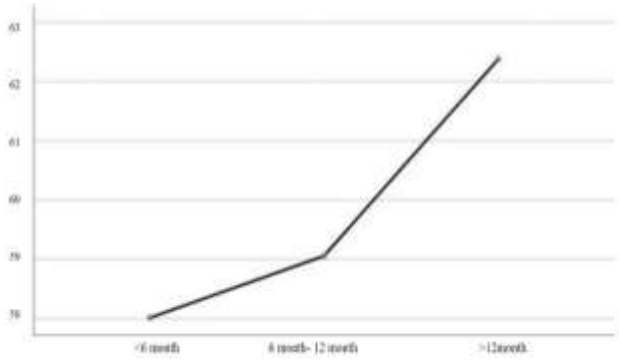

Figure 3. Line Chart of Motivation Means for Different Study Durations.

In the independent samples t-test for personality traits and learning motivation, introverted students showed significantly higher motivation in self-driven hobbies compared to extroverted students ($P = 0.035$, $P < 0.05$). There were no significant differences for other motivation types. Regardless of whether students were introverted or extroverted, the mean scores for situational motivation were higher than those for other types of motivation.

Table 7. Independent Samples T-Test of Different Personality Types and Learning Motivation.

Type of motivation	Personality	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Sig.
Learning situation	introverted	***16.35***	2.145	-0.398	0.691
	extroverted	***16.59***	2.669		
Task-based	introverted	11.04	3.309	1.579	0.117
	extroverted	9.89	3.04		
Cultural interest	introverted	11.57	1.879	-1.15	0.253
	extroverted	12.12	2.084		
Personal hobbies	introverted	12.22	1.833	2.132	***0.035***
	extroverted	11.02	2.507		
Language utility	introverted	8.7	1.259	-0.073	0.942
	extroverted	8.72	1.297		

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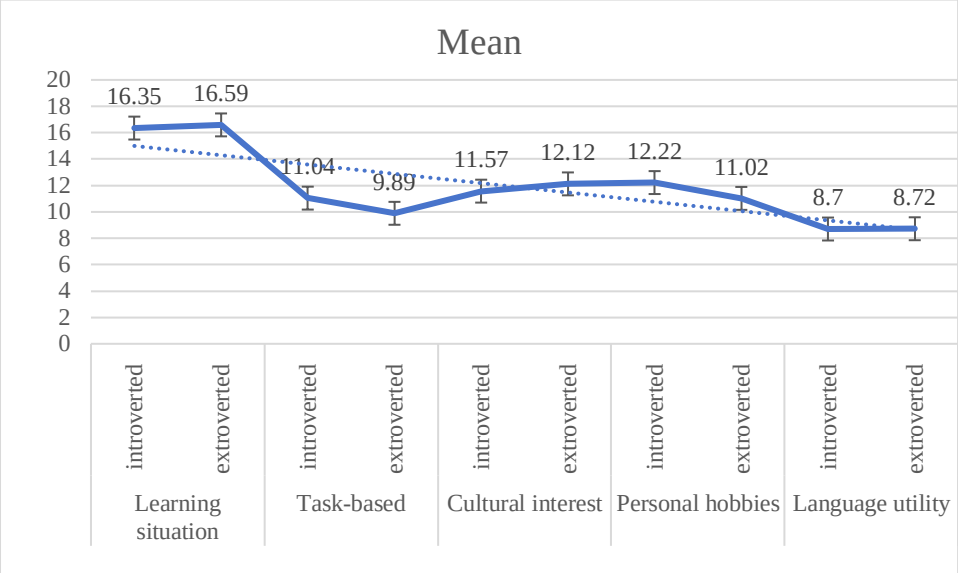

Figure 4. Line Chart of Motivation Means for Different Personality Types

In the independent samples t-test for gender and learning motivation, there were no significant differences in overall motivation between males and females ($P > 0.05$). Males showed slightly stronger task-oriented and self-driven hobby motivation, while females exhibited higher cultural interest motivation. However, the mean differences between males and females across different motivation types were minimal.

Table 8. Independent Samples T-Test of Gender and Learning Motivation.

Type of motivation	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Sig.
Learning situation	Male	16.74	2.308	0.826	0.411
	Female	16.33	2.795		
Task-based	Male	10.3	2.963	0.523	0.602
	Female	9.98	3.288		
Cultural interest	Male	11.83	2.321	-0.845	0.4
	Female	12.17	1.735		
Personal hobbies	Male	11.56	2.246	1.194	0.235
	Female	11	2.577		
Language utility	Male	8.65	1.2	-0.523	0.602
	Female	8.78	1.369		

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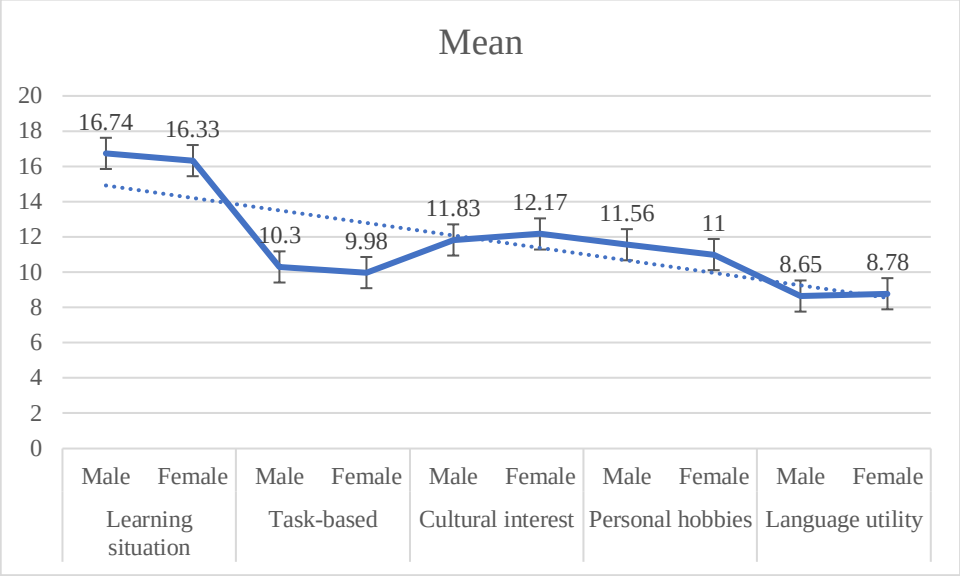

Figure 5. Line Chart of Motivation Means for Different gender.

In short, through variance analysis, age was identified as a significant factor influencing motivation, while personality showed significant differences only in self-driven hobby motivation. Students aged 24–30 displayed the strongest overall motivation, and introverted students tended to favor self-driven motivation. Although learning duration, Chinese proficiency, and gender had some influence on motivation, they did not show statistically significant differences.

Interview Analysis Results

Based on the analysis of the interview transcripts, four key aspects of Lao Chinese learners' characteristics and trends were summarized: purposes for learning Chinese, current learning status and challenges, future plans, and the influence of family and social environments.

Purposes for Learning Chinese: Lao students' motivations for learning Chinese combined instrumental and practical motivations. Learning Chinese serves as a vital tool for facilitating business communication and also helps students from financially disadvantaged families apply for scholarships or study abroad opportunities. These learners mainly consisted of employees and students. For example, Xiao Mo mentioned, "Learning Chinese well can help my family with our business." Similarly, Xiao Shan stated, "My job requires me to learn Chinese, as it helps improve efficiency." Some learners, particularly younger ones, were motivated by their interest in Chinese culture, films, or celebrities. Xiao Sai said, "I like Chinese singer Lu Han and TFBOYS, and they inspire me to learn Chinese." Xiao Sha, on the other hand, expressed fascination with China's natural scenery and traditions, saying, "I want to visit Northeast China to see the snow."

Current learning status and challenges: In the process of learning, Lao Chinese learners face two main challenges. First, learning Approaches. Most learners choose to systematically study Chinese through training classes, while a smaller number opt for online courses or full-time programs to improve their language skills. For example, Xiao Xin and Xiao Shan both mentioned that they primarily rely on training classes to master basic Chinese. Compared to other methods, training classes are more suitable for working individuals with limited time, while full-time courses cater better to student groups. Second, learning Difficulties. Learners generally report that writing and reading Chinese characters are the most significant challenges, whereas listening and speaking skills improve relatively quickly. For instance, Xiao Ma noted, "My listening and speaking are pretty good, but my reading level is poor because I don't recognize many characters." This phenomenon reflects a common issue in learning Chinese in non-native environments, where the development of written expression tends to lag behind other skills.

Future Plans. Most learners have clear plans for the future, focusing primarily on career development and further education. For many learners, Chinese is seen as a key factor in enhancing their professional competitiveness,

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especially for entering Chinese companies or working in China-related industries. For example, Xiao Zhen hopspoken Chinese is a basic requirement for this job." Similarly, Xiao Liu also aims to work in a Chinese bank and is striving to improve her language skills to meet the job demands. Some learners view learning Chinese as a necessary step toward achieving their study-abroad goals. Xiao Sai, Xiao Xin, and Xiao Gao all stated that passing the HSK exam is a prerequisite for applying for scholarships at Chinese universities. They expressed great anticipation for studying abroad, hoping to access more academic resources and expand future career opportunities through Chinese proficiency.

Influence of Family and Social Environment. Family and social environments play a significant role in learners' motivation and performance in Chinese learning. Many learners' families provide direct encouragement for learning Chinese. For example, Xiao Mo's family is in the timber business and frequently interacts with Chinese clients, making him aware of the importance of Chinese from a young age. Similarly, Xiao Xin mentioned that her parents not only support her learning Chinese but also hired a Chinese tutor for her extracurricular studies. At the same time, friends and colleagues significantly influence learners' Chinese learning. For instance, Xiao Pu was inspired by a friend studying Chinese in Shanghai, which sparked his interest in learning the language. Xiao Liu, encouraged by a friend who is a Chinese teacher, has actively engaged in his studies. These cases demonstrate that social networks are a vital factor in promoting language learning.

Discussion

Significant differences in learning motivation were observed among different age groups, with the 24–30 age group showing the highest motivation intensity. This may be related to career pressure and job-seeking demands during this stage of life. In the interviews, learners such as Xiao Zhen and Xiao Liu explicitly stated that learning Chinese was aimed at enhancing their professional competitiveness, aligning with the findings of high motivation in the 24–30 age groups. In contrast, the lower motivation observed in the 10–16 age group may reflect unclear learning goals at this stage, where learners are more driven by idol admiration or personal interest. For example, Xiao Sai mentioned that her love for Lu Han motivated her to learn Chinese. This finding aligns with existing research. Muñoz's study also suggests that age influences the type of motivation learner's exhibit. Younger learners tend to display intrinsic motivation, while older learners focus more on instrumental motivations, such as career needs (Muñoz & Tragant, 2001). Thus, there are notable differences in learning goals and motivation types across age groups, with older learners favoring practical and instrumental motivations, while younger learners are more influenced by interest and cultural appealIn this study, gender showed no significant effect on overall learning motivation ($P > 0.05$), which differs from findings in the existing literature. Bećirović's research indicates that female learners exhibit higher motivation and more positive attitudes in language learning. Studies have also shown that gender significantly influences motivation and achievement, with females outperforming males across all age groups in language learning (Becirovic, 2017). Wucherer found that gender differences manifest in specific aspects of language learning, with males excelling in phonetic imitation and females demonstrating greater proficiency in grammar learning(Wucherer & Reiterer, 2018).

The influence of personality on motivation was limited. Introverted students scored significantly higher than extroverted students in self-driven hobby motivation ($P = 0.035$), but there were no significant differences in other types of motivation. Interviews revealed that introverted learners tend to focus more on personal growth, while extroverted learners are more influenced by their environment. This finding is consistent with previous research. Aldosari's study showed that females are generally more proactive and positive in language learning compared to males, with attitudes that favor language acquisition (Aldosari, 2014). Therefore, personality plays a subtle role in shaping the type of motivation. This suggests that teachers need to tailor their instructional strategies based on personality differences. Introverted students may benefit more from independent learning resources, while extroverted students may thrive in group-based and interactive teaching environments

Although Chinese proficiency showed no significant effect on motivation ($P = 0.415$, $P>0.05$), intermediate learners exhibited stronger task-oriented motivation. Interviews revealed that beginner-level students (HSK Level 1) rely more on their native language or an intermediary language due to their limited Chinese proficiency, which might reduce their engagement and motivation. In contrast, intermediate learners, such as Xiao Xin, who continuously improve their language skills through training classes, demonstrated clearer goals. Nevisi & Farhani's research indicates that learners at different proficiency levels exhibit different sources of motivation. Beginner and

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intermediate learners tend to rely more on extrinsic motivations (e.g., exams or career needs), while advanced learners focus more on intrinsic motivations, such as self-fulfillment and cultural interest (Bagheri Nevisi & Farhani, 2022). Thus, it can be inferred that motivation levels are not only directly influenced by language ability but are also closely tied to learners' stage-specific goals. The higher task-oriented motivation among intermediate learners likely reflects their position at a critical stage of progressing to more advanced levels.

Although learning duration was not significantly correlated with overall motivation (P = 0.206), students with over a year of study showed stronger motivation in cultural interest and self-driven hobbies. Interviews also highlighted that long-term learners tend to develop motivation from an interest-based perspective. For example, Xiao Sai expressed a desire to learn more about Chinese culture. Fryer's research suggests that learning duration and experience play a critical role in sustaining motivation over time. Self-concept and intrinsic motivation dominate in the early stages of language learning and are directly linked to sustained learning and achievement (Fryer, 2015).Therefore, it can be concluded that learning motivation gradually shifts toward intrinsic interests over time. Beginners tend to rely more on external goals (e.g., exams and studying abroad), while long-term learner's exhibit stronger cultural interests and personal pursuits.

Recommendations

Optimize Classroom Teaching with Differentiated Strategies. Implement differentiated teaching strategies tailored to students' varying language proficiency levels. For beginner learners, Chinese teachers should focus on gradually improving basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) using Comprehensible Input strategies. Emphasis should be placed on encouragement to spark students' interest in learning. For intermediate learners, task-based learning methods can be applied to design real-life scenarios, such as role-playing or simulated dialogues, to enhance the practical application of language (Bao & Du, 2015). For advanced learners, teachers should integrate critical thinking with language expression through activities such as discussions, debates, and academic writing training to help students achieve higher-level language proficiency (Floyd, 2011). This differentiated approach adjusts teaching difficulty and content based on learners' language levels, improving the relevance and effectiveness of instructionDesign Diverse Extracurricular Activities. Combine cultural learning with language practice to inspire interest and increase engagement. Organize celebrations of Chinese festivals (e.g., Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival) and incorporate traditional arts experiences (e.g., calligraphy, paper cutting) to enhance learners' cultural identity and interest (Ruan et al., 2015).Facilitate language learning camps or urban exploration activities (e.g., simulating shopping scenes in Chinese markets) to improve students' language proficiency through real-life communication. Use online resources or collaborative projects to connect learners with native speakers, promoting practical language use and cultural understanding (Chen & Du, 2022). These activities compensate for the lack of interaction opportunities in non-target language environments and stimulate learners' intrinsic motivation.

Strengthen Teachers' Cross-Cultural Teaching Competence. Enhance teachers' ability to address the complexities of teaching in a non-target language environment. Organize regular cross-cultural teaching workshops to help teachers understand how learners' cultural backgrounds influence their learning styles (Hofstede, 1986). Train teachers to identify cross-cultural conflicts and develop effective communication skills to create a more inclusive classroom environment (Austin et al., 2017).

Encourage teachers to reflect on and optimize their teaching methods, such as incorporating gamification and blended learning approaches to increase classroom interactivity and engagement (Këndusi, 2015). These measures will enhance teachers' adaptability in teaching, improve their ability to motivate learners, and create a more effective and supportive learning environment.

Conclusion

The study primarily found that most students are at the beginner to intermediate level, with relatively short learning durations, and typically learn Chinese through training programs. Students' interest in classroom learning is mainly derived from the importance of the Chinese language and teachers' teaching styles. Age significantly affects learning motivation, while learning duration has a significant impact on "cultural interest" motivation. However, duration of studies, gender, and Chinese proficiency levels showed no significant correlation with motivation.

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Motivation among primary and secondary school students is strongly influenced by personal interest and family factors. University students tend to have strong motivation in the early stages of learning, but it decreases over time due to academic pressure. Working adults are primarily driven by professional needs, with additional influences from cultural interest and their surrounding environment.

This study has limitations in terms of sample size and scope. With only 108 samples, the small scale makes it difficult to comprehensively reflect Lao students' learning motivations. The sample was concentrated at Soochow University in Laos, excluding students from other regions or institutions, which limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study's limited perspective did not delve deeply into the influence of Laos' governmental language policies or societal attitudes, leaving macro-level factors affecting learning motivation unexplored.

Future research should expand the sample size and scope. Increasing the sample size to over 500 participants will enhance the representativeness and scientific validity of the study from a statistical perspective. It should also cover more regions and institutions, including Chinese-language schools, Confucius Institutes, university Chinese departments, and training programs, to improve the diversity of the sample. Additionally, future research should incorporate multidimensional variables such as learning strategies, living environments, and language proficiency to comprehensively reveal the factors influencing motivation. Longitudinal studies and policy analysis should also be conducted to track the dynamic changes in learning motivation and its long-term impact on language learning outcomes. Furthermore, an in-depth investigation into the Lao government's language policies and their influence on students' learning motivation is necessary to refine the research framework from a societal perspective.

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