

**The Cultural Rhythms of Variant Chinese Characters:
Research on the Transmission of Variant Characters in
Zhuang Ethnic Minority Texts during the Mid-to-Late
Qing Dynasty.**

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Abstract

This study examines the preservation and adaptation of Chinese variant characters in the Zhuang region during the mid-to-late Qing Dynasty, exploring how cultural transmission unfolded at the intersection of Han and Southeast Asian influences. The research focuses handwritten manuscripts from the Zhuang community, analyzing their content through historical comparison and cross-cultural analysis. Key findings reveal that the Zhuang region maintained and repurposed many variant characters phased out in Han-dominated cultural centers, integrating them with local meanings, even spreading them to further areas. These characters served as vessels of cultural memory, reflecting the unique rhythm of cultural diffusion from the Han cultural center to peripheral regions and beyond. The study concludes that the Zhuang community, by preserving and adapting these symbols, enriched Chinese civilization's diversity and highlighted the dynamic interaction between central and peripheral cultures. This research underscores the importance of cultural flexibility and resilience in maintaining ethnic identity and offers insights for preserving cultural diversity in a globalized context.

Keywords: Zhuang minority, variant Chinese characters, mid-to-late Qing Dynasty, ethnic culture, character transmission, cultural diversity

1. Introduction

The evolution and preservation of written language often serve as a powerful lens through which to explore cultural interactions and transformations. This study focuses

on the transmission and adaptation of Chinese variant characters in the Zhuang region during the mid-to-late Qing Dynasty, a period characterized by heightened cultural exchanges between the Han cultural center and peripheral ethnic communities. The Zhuang region, as a significant interface between Han Chinese and Southeast Asian cultural spheres, provides a unique case to investigate how centralized cultural policies influenced peripheral areas and how these areas, in turn, reinterpreted and localized cultural elements.

Chinese variant characters(汉字异体字)—alternative forms of standard characters—embody a dynamic history of language evolution. In the Han-dominated regions during the Qing Dynasty, these characters were gradually phased out through state-driven efforts like the standardization of language and the dissemination of uniform educational texts. Yet, in the Zhuang region, these characters persisted and even thrived, integrated into local religious, social, and linguistic practices. Their survival highlights the contrasting cultural rhythms between the center and the periphery, offering insights into the adaptability and resilience of minority cultures within the framework of a centralized cultural paradigm.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it sheds light on the mechanisms of cultural retention and adaptation in a multi-ethnic empire, emphasizing the agency of peripheral communities in shaping their cultural identities. Second, it provides a historical perspective on the Zhuang region as a cultural bridge, connecting Han Chinese influences with Southeast Asian contexts. Finally, by understanding the historical trajectory of variant characters, this study contributes to broader discussions on cultural diversity, language preservation, and identity formation in the face of globalization.

In this paper, it examines the cultural significance of Chinese variant characters in the Zhuang region by analyzing handwritten manuscripts, historical records, and textual artifacts. The research explores how these characters were preserved, localized, and adapted within the Zhuang community, and how this process reflects broader patterns of cultural interaction and exchange. By situating this study within the larger framework of the "Tianxia" System, I aim to elucidate the interplay between center

and periphery, showcasing the enduring resilience and creativity of ethnic cultures in shaping the broader tapestry of Chinese civilization.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing the Tianxia System

2.1.1. Theoretical Foundations of the Tianxia System (天下体系)

Zhao Tingyang's conceptualization of the "Tianxia System" emphasizes its role as a civilizational framework that transcends the boundaries of nation-states, empires, and sovereignty. He describes it as a system of coexistence among diverse cultures and peoples, characterized by inclusivity and the coexistence of multiple governance models. Even after the end of the Tianxia System as a political entity, its cultural legacy has persisted in shaping China as a multi-ethnic and multicultural unified state.^[1] The Tianxia System's flexibility and inclusivity allowed it to integrate diverse cultures while maintaining a coherent civilizational identity. Unlike fixed territorial boundaries, the system operated through cultural influence, expanding the reach of Chinese civilization beyond geographical constraints.

2.1.2. Historical Dynamics of China's Cultural Boundaries

The historical evolution of China's boundaries, as illustrated in *The Historical Atlas of China* edited by Tan Qixiang, highlights the fluidity of territorial governance.^[2] Zhao Tingyang's *Blessing to This Land* elaborates on the temporal and spatial dynamics of China's development, distinguishing between the nation, civilization, and historical entity of China. These elements were not formed simultaneously but gradually converged over time, creating a unique civilizational model.^[3] Ge Zhaoguang further reinforces this understanding, describing China as a cultural community with a clearly defined core and a flexible periphery.^[4] This

non-overlapping relationship among historical territory, political governance, and cultural influence underscores the adaptability and inclusivity of Chinese civilization, which has sustained its continuity despite political shifts and territorial changes.

2.2. The Tianxia System and Cultural Transmission

2.2.1. Cultural Diffusion as Ripple Effects

The Tianxia System's cultural diffusion is best understood through a metaphor of ripples generated by a stone dropped in water. The center, representing the cultural core of China, radiates influence outward in diminishing intensity. This model highlights the temporal and spatial attenuation of cultural transmission, as well as the inherent adaptability of peripheral cultures in interacting with the center.

2.2.2. Case Study: The Wufu System (五服制度)

An early example of ripple-like diffusion is the Wufu System, which divided the Chinese empire into concentric zones of governance. According to *the Book of Documents, Yi Ji* (尚书·益稷): "Assist in completing the five ranks of distance, up to five thousand li."^[5] These zones—Dianfu, Houfu, Binfu, Yaofu, and Huangfu—reflected varying levels of integration with the central state. Peripheral regions retained significant autonomy, absorbing Chinese cultural elements at their own pace. Wu Fei notes that studying the Wufu System provides critical insights into the Tianxia System's operational logic and its application in governing diverse cultural groups during the Qin and subsequent dynasties.^[6]

3. Methodology

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to investigate the transmission and adaptation of Chinese variant characters in the Zhuang ethnic region during the Qing Dynasty. The methodology integrates historical textual analysis, cultural anthropology, and cross-cultural comparative studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of

the research problem. This analysis is aimed at understanding the broader implications of cultural transmission and adaptation under the Tianxia framework.

3.1. Data Collection

Primary sources included hand-copied manuscripts such as *The Book for Sending the Holy Mother and Child* and *The Mystical Secrets of Spiritual Ascent*, which are key examples of Zhuang religious texts containing variant characters. Secondary sources included historical archives, such as the *Kangxi Dictionary*, and relevant research literature on Ming and Qing Dynasty cultural policies. These sources were accessed from public archives, libraries, and private collections.

3.2. Analytical Framework

The analysis was structured around three key themes in order:

1. **Preservation of Variant Characters:** Examining how variant characters retained their traditional forms and meanings within Zhuang religious texts.
2. **Cultural Adaptation and Localization:** Investigating how these characters were repurposed within Zhuang cultural contexts.
3. **Cross-Cultural Diffusion:** Exploring how variant characters influenced or were influenced by interactions with other cultural systems, such as the Vietnamese Nom script.

General Workflow: Character Identification → Archival Analysis → Textual Comparison → Contextual Interpretation → Cross-Cultural Analysis(only for Vietnamese Chu Nom) → Conclusion Derivation.

4. Results

In the Chinese civilization centered on the "Tianxia System," characters function as both a medium for cultural transmission and a symbol of center-periphery

interactions. Variant characters, with different written forms under the same pronunciation and meaning, reflect the historical dynamics of cultural dissemination and local adaptation. During the Qing Dynasty, Han-dominated regions saw accelerated character standardization due to the imperial examination and administrative needs, leading to the elimination of many variant characters, as exemplified by the *Kangxi Dictionary*(康熙字典)^[7]. In contrast, the geographically isolated and culturally autonomous Zhuang region preserved these variants, incorporating them into local society with new functions.

Zhuang religious texts and folk writings reveal three key stages in the transformation of variant characters: preservation, adaptation, and expansion. First, many manuscripts retained characters eliminated in Han regions, demonstrating cultural continuity. Second, these characters acquired new local meanings, contributing to the development of square Zhuang script and serving as tools for ethnic expression. Finally, as a cultural crossroads between the Central Plains and Southeast Asia, the Zhuang region facilitated the spread of variant characters beyond China, influencing scripts such as Vietnamese Nôm(越南喃字) and granting them new cross-cultural significance.

This inheritance process reflects the cultural rhythm of the "Tianxia System": while central regions pursued rapid standardization, peripheral areas preserved traditions at a slower pace, enriching cultural diversity. Variant characters thus serve as a key to understanding Chinese civilization's inclusiveness and evolution, positioning the Zhuang region as both a cultural bridge and a testament to coexistence. The following analysis explores this transmission path through three stages: preservation, adaptation, and cross-cultural expansion.

1. The Preservation of Writing and Meaning of Variant Characters

1. Example One: "靈" and its Variant "靈"

In Mid-to-late Qing Dynasty, Zhuang manuscripts such as *The Book for Sending the Holy Mother and Child* (送圣母小儿书) and *The Mystical Secrets of Spiritual Ascent* (灵宝升度秘法大全), the variant character "靈"(靈) was widely used. It carried traditional meanings related to religious spirituality, such as "Five Spiritual Lords" in Taoism and "Universal Deliverance of Living Beings" in Buddhism. While Zhuang texts preserved this form, the Han regions gradually eliminated such variants during the standardization process, solidifying "靈" as the official character.

During the Ming Dynasty's Jiajing period, with the transition from Zhao-style to Song-style typefaces, the push toward typographic regularization became evident. The number of printed books also significantly increased. Publications by prominent Ming publishers such as Jinling Fuchuntang(金陵富春堂) widely adopted the variant "靈"(靈) in works like *The Story of Yue Fei*(岳飞破虏东窗记)^[10] and *Xue Rengui Crosses the Sea to Conquer the East*(薛仁贵跨海征东白袍记)^[11]. By the Wanli period, Jiao Hong's *On the Misuse of Popular Characters*(俗书刊误)^[16] formally confirmed "靈" as the correct character, marking an advanced phase in Han character standardization.

In the Qing Dynasty, The Kangxi Dictionary^[7] further codified "靈" as the standard, with widespread usage in official texts and religious scriptures such as the *The First Volume of the Initial Draft of the Jade Book of Genealogy*(玉牒初草卷一)^[12] and *Annotated Forty-Two Chapters of the Buddha's Teachings*(佛说四十二章经注).^[13] This process reflects the rapid cultural rhyme and centralization-driven unification of Han script.

2. Example Two: "帶" and its Variant "𦘒"

Similarly, in Zhuang manuscripts like *The Book for Sending the Holy Mother and Child*^[8], *Sacrificial Rituals*(祭酒科)^[14], and *The Mystical Secrets of Spiritual Ascent*^[9], the variant "𦘒"(帶) retained its traditional meaning linked to religious symbolism, such as "Twelve Stages of Growth: Guan Dai"(十二长生之一: 冠帶) in Taoist rites. In the 1930s, *the Dictionary of Vernacular Characters from the Song and Yuan Dynasties Onwards*^[15], observing *The White Robe Record*(白袍记) and other documents, the variant character "𦘒" still appeared. However, by the Ming Wanli period, scholars like Jiao Hong in *On the Misuse of Popular Characters*^[16] classified "帶" as the correct form, deepening the process of Han character standardization.

3. Summary:

The examples of the variant characters "靈" and "𦘒" in Zhuang manuscripts highlight their dual roles: continuing traditional Han linguistic elements while acquiring localized functions. These characters were used to express local beliefs and integrate Central Plains religious contexts, preserving their original meanings in Han culture. This reflects the differing cultural rhythms of transmission between central and peripheral regions. The persistence of variant characters in peripheral areas was not merely a historical relic but demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of local cultures in absorbing central influences. In contrast, Han-dominated regions experienced rapid standardization of characters due to the Ming Dynasty's printing industry and civil service examinations, gradually eliminating variants. This process revealed the scope and power dynamics of cultural dissemination.

This study also identifies a significant connection between the transmission of Zhuang variant characters and Ming Dynasty's Jiajing period Han cultural policies. According to *The Guangxi Gazetteer*^[17] and *Guangxi Education History*^[18], the Jiajing period marked the first peak of Guangxi's academy construction, with 70 academies (66 newly built, 4 restored), comprising 23% of the total throughout

history. The number of academies built during the Jiajing reign constituted over half of those in the entire Ming period (Jin Hong et al., Qing Dynasty; Yang Xinyi et al., 1997). Lan Wu and Huang Dongcheng (2019) observed that this surge in academies resulted from frequent proposals by Grand Secretaries and the direct support of the Jiajing Emperor.^[19] These policies significantly advanced the spread of Han culture in Guangxi, laying a foundation for Zhuang communities to adopt and preserve the character forms of the Jiajing period.

2. The Adaptation of Variant Chinese Characters in Ethnic Literature

In the previous section, this study explored the "cultural retention" phenomenon in peripheral ethnic regions, where variant Chinese characters were preserved and continued in local religious texts and folk writings. This reflects the unique cultural rhythm of peripheral areas in receiving Han culture. However, with the further spread of Han culture, variant characters were not merely "retained" but were assigned new localized meanings, even evolving into new uses and pronunciations, forming a dynamic process of cultural integration.

This integration process is embodied in the phenomenon of "adaptation" of variant characters. Here, "adaptation" refers to the redefinition of variant Han characters in specific local contexts, granting them functions different from their original Han usage. This highlights the creativity and agency of peripheral regions and reveals the progression from "retention to fusion" in character dissemination. Thus, the adaptation of variant characters in ethnic regions illustrates the interaction between Han and local cultures and further demonstrates cultural rhythm differences.

The following analysis of two variant characters, 晚 and 寺, in Zhuang literature investigates their localized transformation in peripheral regions.

1. Example One: "晚" and its Variant “𠂔”

The variant character "𠂔" has clear usage records in Han literature. In the Dictionary of Vernacular Characters from the Song and Yuan Dynasties Onwards^[15], it is cited from *Taiping Yuefu*(太平乐府), *The Story of the Journey to the West in Verse*(取经诗话), and *Jiao Hong Ji*(娇红记), among others, where the character "𠂔" appears. In Han regions, this character was mainly used as a vernacular form in daily writing, with its meaning related to "late", mainly expressing the continuation or delay of time. However, as this variant character spread to the Zhuang areas of Guangxi, its usage and meaning underwent significant changes.

In the late Qing text *The Mystical Secrets of Spiritual Ascent*^[20], the term "晚上" is used, preserving the Han cultural context of "evening." However, in the Daoguang-era text *Sending the Holy Mother and Child*^[8], "𠂔" diverges from its original Han linguistic framework, taking on a specific meaning in Zhuang language. In the sentence, “台麻傍圣母，明麻𠂔父妹”，the "𠂔" has departed from the original semantic system of the Han language and taken on a specific meaning in the Zhuang language. Further, in *Lanlv Lang*(欖朶浪)^[20] from southern Guangxi during the Guangxu period, "𠂔隆加魂斗" exemplifies the localization of "𠂔" as it assumes new ritualistic or religious significance, possibly tied to local beliefs.

Thus, the adaptation of "𠂔" in Zhuang texts reflects its transformation from a central cultural element to a locally integrated one. It not only retains aspects of the original meaning but also exhibits unique functions and interpretations, demonstrating the creativity and independence of Zhuang culture in accepting Han cultural elements.

2. Example Two: "等" and its Variant “𠂔”

Similarly, the variant character "𠂔" appears in Han literature as cited in the Dictionary of Vernacular Characters from the Song and Yuan Dynasties Onwards^[15],

such as *The Record of Mu Lian*(目连记). Commonly interchangeable with "等" in Han contexts, its usage and meaning shifted significantly upon integration into the Zhuang region.

In the Daoguang-era Zhuang text *Sending the Holy Mother and Child*^[8], the sentence "崇雷十二寺" shows how "寺" was Zhuang-ized, becoming linked with local meaning. This diverged from its Han equivalence as "等." In late Qing texts like *Sacrificial Rituals*(祭酒科)^[14], phrases such as "偷床(来)寺啗都" further highlight its localized uses with distinct Zhuang characteristics. At the same time, *The Mystical Secrets of Spiritual Ascent*^[9], the phrase "一门寺众" indicates that in this context, the character "寺" still retains the "众" meaning from Han culture. The existence of these dual meanings reflects the complex adaptation process of variant characters in ethnic literature.

3. Summary:

The analyses of "晚" and "寺" in Zhuang literature reveal the proactive and creative roles of ethnic communities in accepting Han culture. These characters, after reaching peripheral regions, underwent simplification, phonetic localization, and semantic expansion, becoming integral to local cultural systems. This adaptation not only reflects the influence of central Han culture but also underscores the resilience and innovation of peripheral cultures. However, the current preservation and research of ethnic literature remain incomplete. Further systematic studies combining linguistics, anthropology, and history are needed to fully understand the sociocultural functions of these adapted characters. Such efforts could provide new insights into the interaction between Han and minority cultures while offering valuable guidance for contemporary cultural preservation.

3. Further Dissemination and Expansion of Chinese Variant Characters

In the earlier discussions, the preservation and localization of Chinese variant characters in minority regions were analyzed, showcasing the pathways of cultural diffusion from the center to the periphery. However, this cultural dissemination does not stop there. From minority regions, the influence of Chinese variant characters can extend further, reaching distant borderlands and even Southeast Asia. The significance of this dissemination path lies in the minority regions' dual role as both receivers of Central Plains culture and as cultural "bridges," further transmitting Chinese character culture into Southeast Asia, and even acting as secondary centers or intermediaries for cultural diffusion.

This section uses a comparison between variant characters in Zhuang texts and the Vietnamese Nôm script to analyze how Chinese variant characters, through the Zhuang region, further spread into the Vietnamese cultural sphere. By tracing two variant characters, the processes of cultural blending and adaptation become evident. This shows that minority regions not only passively accept Central Plains culture but also actively drive cultural dissemination, playing crucial roles in the multidimensional interaction of language, text, and cultural identity.

1. Example One: "等" and its Variant “𠂔”

As discussed in Part Two, the variant character “𠂔” frequently appears in Qing-era Zhuang texts such as *Sending the Holy Mother and Child* ^[8] and *Sacrificial Rituals* ^[14]. It primarily corresponds to the standard Han character “等” and some localized concepts. Similarly, in the Vietnamese dictionary *ự đin chữ Nom Tay. Nxb (TĐCNT)* ^[21], the character “𠂔” can also be found. It is included in the word “Si Táng” (𠂔), meaning “cube” or “hexahedron”. The dictionary explains “Si Táng” as “Khối co sau mặt vuông bằng nhau”, which means “a three-dimensional shape with

all six faces being squares". Additionally, in the example sentences of the dictionary, "Khuon mần si táng bấu to"(坤门四寺否都) is interpreted as "The shapes of circle and cube do not need to be measured" (Hình tron cũng như khối lập phương thì không cần đo).

Comparative analysis reveals a significant contextual shift. In Zhuang texts, the character mainly functions as a verb, while in Vietnamese it has been integrated into descriptions of geometric concepts, becoming a term for a cube. This semantic evolution demonstrates that the character underwent localization and semantic expansion upon entering the Vietnamese cultural sphere, likely driven by local cultural needs.

2. Example One: "𠬞" and its Variant "𠬞"

The variant character "𠬞" as an alternative form of the Han character "举" appears frequently in Qing-era Zhuang texts. In documents such as *Sending the Holy Mother and Child*^[8] and *The Mystical Secrets of Spiritual Ascent*^[9], the character retains its original meanings of "to lift" or "to recommend." Its usage illustrates the continuation and traditionality of character forms within the Zhuang region. However, this character's cultural journey does not end in Zhuang territory. In Vietnamese Nôm script, the character also appears, but its meanings have diversified significantly.

In the Vietnamese *Tự Điển Chữ Nôm Dẫn Giải* dictionary^[22] and on tools like *zi.tools*, the character "𠬞" encompasses multiple semantic layers:

- Cỗ: Refers to size, scale, or proportion, e.g., cỗ lớn ("large size").
- Cử: Corresponds closely to the Han meaning, including "to lift," "recommend," or "elect," e.g., cử tạ ("weightlifting").
- Cữ: Indicates restrictions or taboos, e.g., kiêng cữ ("abstention"). This reflects its expanded semantic use related to social and cultural customs.

In addition to the above interpretations, the character "𡩺" in Vietnamese has developed a new usage, namely, to represent the concept of "door" or "entrance". By analyzing the sentence examples in the *Tự Điển Chữ Nôm Dẫn Giải*^[22], the semantic transformation process can be more clearly seen.

Example 1 from *Phân Trần*, 8b^[24]:

Trải xem thu lạ chiều xuan. Hoa cai cửa(𡩺) động, đa ngăn vách chiến. Translation: "On a spring evening, I enjoy the strange beauty. Flowers decorate the entrance of the cave, and many stones block the crevices of the rock wall."

Here, "cửa(𡩺)" clearly refers to "entrance" or "door," a departure from the Han meaning of "to lift." This shows the character's semantic transformation in the Vietnamese context.

Example 2 from *Truyện Kiều*, 55b^[23]:

Cửa(𡩺) phong vội mở rem chau. Trời cao bể rộng một mau bao la. Translation: "The door was hastily opened, revealing the curtain. The sky is high and the sea is vast, boundless and wide."

In this sentence, "cửa(𡩺)" refers to the "door" or "entrance" of a room, signifying the character's adaptation to architectural terms in Vietnamese script.

3. Summary:

The analysis of “𡩺” and “𡩺” in Zhuang texts and Vietnamese dictionaries reveals the cross-cultural transmission path of Chinese variant characters. From Han-dominated regions to minority areas and then into Southeast Asia, this process highlights the characters' dual roles as symbols of cultural transmission and tools of localized reinvention. The Zhuang region emerges not only as a recipient of Han culture but also as an active agent of cultural dissemination, adapting and re-creating Han characters to foster further southward diffusion.

This dissemination path exemplifies the "Tianxia System" in cultural practice, illustrating how cultural diffusion is not linear but involves layers of absorption and

adaptation. The preservation of variant characters in Zhuang texts reflects the slower rhythm of peripheral cultural adaptation, while their reinvention in Southeast Asia demonstrates dynamic cross-cultural interaction. These findings provide a foundation for understanding the broader Southeast Asian Han character cultural sphere and offer insights into how Chinese civilization integrates inclusiveness and adaptability.

Thus, the cross-cultural transmission of Chinese variant characters represents not just the extension of text but also a dynamic cultural construct. This process deepens our understanding of how Chinese culture adapts and evolves at the margins, revealing the inclusiveness and resilience of Chinese civilization in global history.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Findings

This study has examined the preservation, adaptation, and dissemination of Chinese variant characters in the Zhuang ethnic region during the Qing Dynasty, revealing the dynamic cultural rhythm that shaped their textual practices. The research demonstrates that while Han Chinese regions underwent rapid textual standardization driven by the central government's political and administrative policies, the Zhuang region retained older variant character forms due to geographical isolation and cultural autonomy. Moreover, these characters were not only preserved but also adapted to fit local linguistic and religious contexts, demonstrating the creative agency of the Zhuang people. Finally, the study highlights the role of the Zhuang region as a bridge for cross-cultural diffusion, influencing the Vietnamese Nom script and further illustrating the layered nature of cultural interactions under the *Tianxia* framework.

5.2. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have several important implications. Firstly, they challenge the traditional view that cultural transmission is a unidirectional process from the center to the periphery. Instead, the Zhuang region exemplifies how local cultures actively engage with and reshape external influences, leading to a more reciprocal and dynamic model of cultural interaction. Secondly, the research underscores the importance of cultural rhythm in shaping historical linguistic development. The differing speeds of textual change in Han Chinese and Zhuang regions reveal the impact of socio-political forces on cultural preservation. Thirdly, the study contributes to the broader understanding of the *Tianxia* system as a flexible and adaptive civilizational model, where central governance allowed for regional cultural autonomy, fostering both cultural diversity and unity.

5.3. Limitations of the Research

Despite these insights, this study has several limitations. The primary limitation is the availability of historical texts. Many of the Zhuang manuscripts analyzed are privately held or exist in fragmentary form, which constrains the scope of textual comparison. Additionally, due to the interdisciplinary nature of this research—spanning history, linguistics, and anthropology—certain aspects, such as phonetic evolution and syntactic shifts in Zhuang texts, require deeper linguistic analysis beyond the present study’s scope. Furthermore, while the study establishes a strong correlation between Ming and Qing cultural policies and the retention of variant characters, the precise mechanisms of transmission remain an area for further investigation.

5.4. Future Research Directions

Given these limitations, future research could explore several avenues to build on the findings of this study. Firstly, expanding the corpus of Zhuang manuscripts

through collaboration with local archives and private collectors would allow for a more comprehensive textual analysis. Secondly, an in-depth phonetic and syntactic study of how these variant characters function within the Zhuang language system could provide new insights into the linguistic adaptation process. Thirdly, comparative studies with other ethnic groups that retained variant characters—such as the Miao and Dong—could further contextualize the Zhuang case within a broader framework of minority language preservation in imperial China. Lastly, a cross-cultural study of how Chinese variant characters influenced the development of other Southeast Asian scripts, particularly in Vietnam, could shed light on the transregional dimensions of textual transmission within the *Tianxia* system.

5.5. Final Thoughts

This study demonstrates that variant characters in the Zhuang region are not merely relics of an earlier textual tradition but are instead living evidence of the region's cultural resilience and adaptability. By preserving, transforming, and transmitting these characters, the Zhuang people played an active role in shaping the linguistic and cultural landscape of imperial China and beyond. Recognizing such contributions is crucial for reinterpreting the history of Chinese civilization, not as a monolithic entity, but as a dynamic, multiethnic, and continuously evolving cultural network.

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