

Abstract of the thesis entitled

**Literacy Practices and Functions of
the Zhuang Character Writing System**

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This thesis investigates literacy practices and functions of the Zhuang character writing system, using the framework of the social approach to literacy studies. The study is based on data collected from three fieldtrips to the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Yunnan Province, China. Some printed materials were also consulted.

The study first explores the linguistic features of the Zhuang character writing system. It is found that the Zhuang character writing system is strongly affiliated to the Chinese character writing system. This means that, in the majority of cases, Chinese characters are used to record Zhuang morphemes, according to the meaning or the pronunciation of the Chinese character. As a result, knowledge of Chinese characters becomes a prerequisite for literacy of the Zhuang character writing system.

The Zhuang society has a very strong tradition of oral culture, which is characterized by folksong singing. The literacy function of the Zhuang character writing system is strongly dependent on this oral culture. Through the examination of Zhuang character written manuscripts, it is found that most manuscripts are written for folksong singing in their literacy practice. Only very few manuscripts are not related to folksong singing.

The concepts of “literacy gap” and “literacy need” are proposed to explain this phenomenon. In the Zhuang society, the literacy of Chinese character writing is the dominant one. Although the literacy of Chinese is applied in most aspects, it fails to fulfill the literacy need of recording Zhuang oral practices. As a result, a literacy gap



is formed, while the literacy of the Zhuang character writing system is the product of the need. It illustrates how an oral culture causes the occurrence of a new literacy.

The reason why the Zhuang character writing system fails to extend its functions to the other areas is also discussed. It is suggested that as all the people who are literate in Zhuang character writing are also literate in Chinese, there is no literacy need to apply the Zhuang character writing in the functions which are already fulfilled by the Chinese character writing. It illustrates how the linguistic feature of a writing system affects the development of its literacy.

The research suggests that, in order to promote literacy to all Zhuang people, it is essential to create literacy needs of the Zhuang writing. At the same time the literacy of Zhuang writing ought to harmonize with the literacy of the Chinese character writing.

(400 words)

