

# A Review of Japanese Studies on Guangxi's Ethnic Minorities in the Last 40 Years

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**Abstract:** Since the 1980s, Japanese scholars have been doing field research on ethnic minorities in China. Along with its rich and colorful national culture as well as its ecological culture, Guangxi has piqued the interest of Japanese scholars. In order to provide a multi-dimensional observation perspective and useful reference for the sustainable development of contemporary ethnic minorities in Guangxi, this paper analyses and discusses the research methods, discipline fields, and academic contributions of Japanese research on ethnic minorities in Guangxi over the last 40 years.

**Keywords:** Japan; Guangxi; Ethnic minority

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## 1. Introduction

In the long historical development of mankind, the values and ideology of all ethnic groups have undergone profound changes. From a new perspective, it is becoming increasingly vital to explore the historical background and trend of ethnic minority areas. Guangxi is a multi-ethnic autonomous region in South China. It has become an active area for Japan to research Chinese ethnic minority since the reform and opening up. Simultaneously, the number of scholars studying in Japan has steadily expanded, and they have become increasingly prominent in the study of Guangxi ethnic minority in Japan. Based on the foregoing context, this paper examines the history and current state of Japanese research on Guangxi Ethnic Minorities over the last 40 years, reveals the image of Guangxi ethnic minorities among a group of Japanese scholars, and provides fundamental data for the internationalization of Guangxi ethnic minority culture.

## 2. The origin of Japanese studies on Guangxi minority nationalities

The rise of Guangxi minority in Japanese studies is closely related to the development of Japanese ethnology and anthropology. Before World War II, based on the demand of Japanese colonialism, Japanese national scholars and anthropologists opened up Chinese mainland research. In July 1902, Torii Ryuzo, a forerunner of ethnology and anthropology, conducted a field investigation of ethnic minorities in southern China such as Hunan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi and Tibet for seven and a half months, objectively creating a new era for Japanese scholars to study ethnic minorities in southern China. Another Japanese scholar, Shiratori Kurakichi, has epoch-making significance in the study of ethnic history in South China. When he was in university, he chose the history of ancient Baiyue as the topic of his graduation thesis. The purpose of his research is to understand the kinship of ethnic groups in South China. After the war, due to political reasons, Japanese scholars could not enter southern China for research, so they devoted themselves

to the study of Yao nationality in northern Thailand, forming a macro perspective of “Southeast Asia - Southern China – Japan.” With the reform and opening up, Darin Tara investigated the basic situation of Zhuang Nationality in Guangxi in April 1980 and called on his students to follow the example of Torii Ryuzo to go to China’s ethnic minority areas. In December of the following year, Shiratori Kurakichi also visited Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region at the invitation of China Folk Literature and Art Research Association. After that, Taniguchi Tomio, Tsukada Shigeyuki, Tezuka Keiko and other scholars entered Guangxi for field investigation, published a series of high-quality documents and materials, and achieved fruitful results <sup>[1]</sup>.

## **2. The content of Japanese studies on Guangxi minority nationalities**

The main sources of this research literature are Japan’s “KAKEN” scientific research grant database, academic paper database “CINNI” and the National Library of Congress. This paper shows a wonderful picture for the research on ethnic minorities in Guangxi by thoroughly collecting and studying Japanese research materials on ethnic minorities in Guangxi, according to their research contents, and starting from the scholars’ unique perspective, research methods, research contents, and academic contributions.

### **2.1. A continuation journey based on the historical system**

The study of the historical system is an important aspect of the study of ethnic minorities in Guangxi. Shiratori Kurakichi is the founder of the study of South China’s national history. He once put forward two important suggestions. First, based on natural conditions, we can find out the clues of South China’s cultural history by analyzing its life and industry. Second, centering on the native chieftain system of the Ming Dynasty, it clarifies the national pedigree through chieftain and aboriginal official surnames, which helps to grasp the characteristics of ethnic culture in South China <sup>[1]</sup>. According to Shiratori Kurakichi’s suggestions to ethnic minorities in South China, Okada Hiroji made a series of textual research on the border defense system of Guangxi South Road (today’s Guangxi) in the Song Dynasty, as well as the militia, financial problems, horse government system and so on in the Left and Right River basin <sup>[2]</sup>. The chieftain system is also an important link in the study of ethnic groups in South China. Since the mid-1980s, Taniguchi Tomio and Tsukada Shigeyuki have successively inspected the relics of chieftain Yamen and chieftain tombs, and investigated and studied the chieftain genealogy of Zhuang nationality, chieftain Yamen of Xincheng County and the chieftain system of Guangxi in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Kanda Masao made a more comprehensive discussion on the chieftain from the aspects of the origin and inheritance of the chieftain, the Sinicization of the Zhuang Nationality under the chieftain’s rule, and the achievements of Cen’s local officials, which has a certain reference value <sup>[3]</sup>. With the deepening of research, Japanese scholars began to change from the ethnic history of South China to the study of Zhuang and Yao history. As a pioneer in the study of Zhuang studies in Japan, Tsukada Shigeyuki first grasped the dynamics of ethnic minorities in the Left and Right River basins in the Tang and Song Dynasties and studied the relationship, agriculture, commerce and trade and the social structure of nations between ethnic groups in South China (1983).

Since then, Shigeyuki has been committed to the social and cultural research of Zhuang nationality. His doctoral dissertation is a masterpiece of Zhuang nationality research. Before that, there has not been a monograph on the history of Zhuang nationality or the history of Guangxi Minorities in Japan <sup>[4]</sup>. Takemura Takuji began to pay attention to the Yao nationality among the ethnic minorities in South China in the 1960s, but before the 1980s, he mainly studied the style of the Yao nationality through the combination of literature and field investigation in the Yao area of Thailand. Since the 1980s, Takemura was the first to complete the “History and Culture of Yao People: Social Anthropological Study of Mountain Peoples in South China and Southeast Asia <sup>[5]</sup>” which was the classic work of Yao Studies in the world, and promoted

the study of Yao people in Japan to enter the stage of prosperity and development. In 1982, Takemura entered Guangxi to conduct a field survey on the Yao nationality. In the same year, the lecture report “Research on the Yao Nationality in Northern Thailand” made by Guangxi Institute for Nationalities pointed out that the Yao missionary had a great impact on the Yao nationality. The Han nationality and neighboring nationalities have various conditions of national identity edited by Takemura in 1991, which also summarizes the history and research status of Zhuang, Yao and other nationalities. In addition, the relationship between ethnic minorities and surrounding ethnic groups has always been the focus of Japanese history and anthropology, mainly focusing on the interaction between Zhuang and Han and the relationship between Zhuang and Nong in Vietnam. Liujia people living in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County are also one of the objects concerned by Japanese scholars. Although Liujia people are belong to the Han nationality now, they have frequent exchanges with ethnic minorities, implanting some cultural influence of Zhuang and Dong nationalities. In addition, the Nong nationality in Vietnam comes from the Zhuang Nationality Area in Guangxi. Tsukada Shigeyuki pointed out that the two have formed an “old same” relationship (meaning that the two sides are of the same age). In recent years, the loss of young people and the change of consciousness in China’s border areas have affected the interpersonal relationship between Zhuang and Nong ethnic groups. In the future, we should pay more attention to the people living in the border areas, and it is necessary to further think about the significance of border in human life <sup>[6]</sup>.

## **2.2. A revitalization way that takes tourism practice as development**

In the middle and late 1990s, China entered the stage of vigorously developing ethnic tourism. Japanese scholars who have been engaged in ethnic minority research for a long time also keenly grasped this trend. This paper also makes a diachronic investigation on the process of local Dong tourism development, the impact of tourism development on local Dong residents and countermeasures, and analyzes the role and significance of tourism resources in local residents’ daily life <sup>[7]</sup>. Kikuchi Masumi investigated Ping’an village and Dazhai village in Longsheng and found that the local people outside the village are specially employed to maintain the landscape formation and carry out terrace farming, but this will lead to the lack of cultural and living factors. Dr. Kim Hiromi’s thesis investigates the use of Dong cloth through marriage, birth, funeral and other ceremonies, and analyzes the impact of intangible cultural heritage policy on national tourism <sup>[8]</sup>. The doctoral thesis of Jianen Qin, a student studying in Japan, deconstructs the cultural customs of Zhuang, Bunu Yao and Baiku Yao in the Hechi area of Guangxi by analyzing literature on history, culture and ethnography, as well as discusses the relationship between tourism development and modern life. Entering the 21st century, China’s economy has maintained a “miracle” of sustained and rapid growth, people’s lives have been greatly improved, and agriculture and rural areas have also achieved sustainable development. However, the inland areas represented by the Hechi area of Guangxi have not been fundamentally reversed.

In 2001, Wei Chen, a scholar studying in Japan, analyzed the economic situation of the two villages through the investigation of the current situation of farmers’ agricultural management and income in the Hechi area. In 2002, Kurokawa Isao conducted an actual survey on 47 farmers in Qibainong Township, and proposed to implement “small town construction” and take ecological maintenance as one of the long-term strategies. In 2004, Kurokawa Isao and Yamamoto Miho once again inspected the characteristics of the four local villages and the factors of operation and production, stressed the importance of ecological resources, and pointed out that the state should pay attention to the revitalization of education in ethnic minority areas <sup>[9]</sup>. With regard to education in ethnic minority areas, Tosaka Xue investigated the current situation of education in Longsheng, Sanjiang and Rongshui, and proposed to pay attention to the education of girls and students in the stage of compulsory education in ethnic minority areas and provide them with a good dormitory environment <sup>[10]</sup>. In addition, Eguchi Goshin’s paper “Institutionalization of Villager

Autonomy in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region” made a field visit to Hezhai village, Pingnan Township, Yizhou City, which is a village dominated by Zhuang population, revealing the multi-directional system construction of villagers’ autonomy in Hezhai village.

### **2.3. A key point of exploration that takes characteristic culture as the fundamental**

Guangxi is a multi-ethnic region. Ethnic customs and cultural heritage have a special and important impact on social life. Oil tea, ethnic costumes, architectural structure, Zhuang songs, Dong songs, bronze drums and divine paintings are the cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities in Guangxi and the research interests of Japanese scholars. Longsheng Ethnic Autonomous County is a place where many ethnic groups live together. The local Yao, Miao and Dong people have the habit of drinking oil tea. According to local people, the earliest consumption of oil tea was Guoshanyao. The reason is that “Guoshan Yao” lives in the highland and the food supply is insufficient. Drinking a bowl of oil tea before eating precious rice helps to alleviate the feeling of fasting <sup>[11]</sup>. Mitsunari Yumi outlined the geographical location, living environment, living habits, medicine and food homology and economic revitalization policies of Bama Yao Autonomous County <sup>[12]</sup>. Kanashige Tsutomu’s doctoral thesis is the result of a three-year field investigation, which is of great benefit to the development of human environmental science, cultural geography and architecture <sup>[13]</sup>. Jie Huang, a student studying in Japan, discusses the symbolic significance of residents’ bridges from the perspective of soul through the Dong nationality’s custom of “building a bridge.” By discussing the similarities and differences between religious people and villagers in Wuming County who sent the dead to other circles, Tezuka Keiko thought about the problem of “what is the dead.” In addition, Guangxi ethnic minorities have the concept that “animal nature” is an important medium connecting life and death. Minao Kitamura mentioned the ritual of offering frogs to pray for rain for the Zhuang people in Guangxi, as well as the Baiku Yao people in Guangxi who send souls to the dead with bronze drums and make sacrificial columns out of for wood <sup>[14]</sup>. The fourth chapter of Suzuki Masataka’s book “Miao History and Cultural Dynamics: Imagination and Evolution of mountain Peoples in Southern China” describes the visiting gods of Miao people in Rongshui Miao Autonomous County during the Spring Festival. Suzuki Masataka (1995) investigated Baiku Yao in Nandan county, Guangxi, and from the perspective of understanding the inheritance and customs of the bronze drum, and mainly analyzed the “animal nature” of the bronze drum, which is mainly manifested in three aspects: the “bronze drum and begetting children with apes in the Myth of Miroto,” “the bronze drum and the sacrificial buffalo,” “ceremony of offering frogs to pray for rain.” He summarized the social culture of the small non-governmental organization “frying pan” that dominates the drum, and holds that the drum, which embodies many values, is the precious existence of confirming the sociality, religious character and wholeness of Baiku Yao <sup>[15]</sup>. Jing Tan’s paper “Research on the Ritual God Paintings of Yao People (Mianyao) in the Mountain Crossing System” expounds that the Panwang festival in Gongcheng Yao Autonomous County uses the Yao ritual deity painting, and has unique types of deity paintings - Wanglao god painting and Kuguan god painting.

## **3. Research evaluation and enlightenment**

In the past 40 years, Japan has not only dabbled in the multi-dimensional aspects of national history, chieftain system, ethnic relations and religious beliefs, but also made an in-depth analysis on the details of historical facts, the specific links of rituals and the interpretation of cultural significance. The following will specifically discuss the background of Japan’s research on ethnic minorities in Guangxi and refine the relevant enlightenment of valuable significance for the future.

### **3.1. Research evaluation**

Looking at literature, taking time as the axis, the Japanese academic circles mainly collected the original

data before the 1980s, and there were few academic research results. Since the 1980s, guided by the theories of anthropology and ethnology, Japan has mainly studied the history of South China, the history of Zhuang (Yao) nationality, chieftain system, ethnic relations and so on. In the 1990s, China began to enter the stage of vigorously developing tourism. Japanese scholars also keenly caught this trend and actively put forward relevant measures. In the 21st century, China has accelerated the implementation of the rural revitalization policy. Japanese scholars have conducted in-depth research in remote areas such as Longsheng and Yizhou to explore the path of sustainable development. Furthermore, Japanese scholars have also invested enthusiasm in Guangxi's characteristic culture to perceive the international charm of Guangxi's ethnic minorities. Although these research results reflect timeliness and applicability, and the research direction pays more attention to reality, filling the academic gap in relevant fields, the existing problems cannot be ignored. Firstly, the research object is single and the depth is not enough. The research objects mostly focus on the Zhuang, Yao and Dong ethnic groups, pay less attention to the social culture such as Mulao and Gelao ethnic groups, and do not grasp the historical facts before the Ming and Qing Dynasties thoroughly. Secondly, the research team is scattered and understaffed. Researchers are often scattered in the National Museum of Ethnology of Japan, major universities and Chinese students studying in Japan, which is difficult to form an agglomeration effect. Strictly speaking, the study of Guangxi Ethnic Minorities in Japan is not a popular and notable doctrine. At present, it is facing the dilemma of temporary shortage. Finally, the high-quality works are limited and the quality is not high. Under the new situation, there are many new topics and challenges in the study of ethnic minorities in Guangxi, and a series of important research results have emerged, but the academic masterpieces with great influence are still limited.

## **3.2. Enlightenment**

### **3.2.1. Summarize historical experience and strengthen institutional awareness**

Through literature review, we can find that the research on Guangxi Ethnic Minorities in Japan is inextricably linked with China's political system and ethnic relations. China is a multi-ethnic country and has a complete Chinese history. We must strengthen the study of national history. All ethnic groups in Guangxi have a long and continuous history. Early Japanese scholars started from the perspective of history, and gradually promoted the writing of Zhuang and Yao history after summarizing the history of South China. "Viewing the present from the ancient" and "viewing the ancient from the present" closely linked history with reality, aiming to jointly analyze the historical causes of current problems and the practical consequences of historical changes. In the future, China still needs to deepen the research on the historical system of ethnic regions, update the basic information of exchanges between ethnic minorities in Guangxi and cross-border ethnic groups, promote ethnic integration, and enable Guangxi to play a greater role in the construction of the "one belt and one road."

### **3.2.2. Help the research team and focus on cultural construction**

Village is a basic unit of national culture, and its influence cannot be underestimated. Japanese scholars can be seen in many villages in Longsheng County, Wuming County, Sanjiang County, Bama County, Yizhou City and other areas in Guangxi. The objective reasons such as inconvenient transportation and lack of economic conditions in these areas increase the difficulty of their field investigation, but they still devote themselves to it for a long time and in depth. This difficulty is self-evident. It is better to follow the wind than to wait for the wind. In the future, more personnel should be absorbed in studying the minority culture in Guangxi. No matter which country or nation, if they do not cherish their own ideology and culture as well as lose the soul of ideology and culture, this country and nation cannot stand up <sup>[16]</sup>. Therefore, ideological and cultural research is an important means to promote the development of ethnic minorities in Guangxi.

### **3.2.3. Broaden macro vision and pay attention to overseas research**

In the macro-region of “Southeast Asia — South China — Japan,” Japan treats ethnic minorities in Guangxi. Although the notion of this region and macroscopic system may differ from that of Chinese scholars, it is worth noting and may be used as a reference for ethnic minority researchers in Guangxi. Furthermore, Japanese anthropology and ethnology scholars not only focus on local study in Japan, but also extend their perspective to the rest of the world, doing in-depth research on every country. Anthropologists and ethnologists in China focus their studies on all ethnic groups in the country. In China, one of the missing aspects of anthropological study has long been overseas ethnic research. The constituent system of Japanese anthropological research perspective, research methods and academic contribution can provide guiding significance for the development of overseas ethnic research in China.

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