

EX ORIENTE LUMINA
HISTORIAE VARIAE MULTIETHNICAE

**Festskrift tillägnad Juha Janhunen
på hans 61. födelsedag 12.2.2013**

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**Tiina Hyytiäinen, Lotta Jalava,
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Helsinki 2013

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ARABIC SCRIPT AMONG CHINA'S MUSLIMS: A DONGXIANG FOLK STORY

Mikko Suutarinen

INSPIRATION

Belonging to the younger generation of Professor Janhunen's students at the University of Helsinki (having started my undergraduate studies in 1998), I had the pleasure in my first academic year of taking part in his "East Asian Writing Systems", a compulsory undertaking for first-year students. As a result of this course, I became duly convinced about the major role of writing within the East Asian cultural area as a necessary basis for any advanced civilisation.

A few years later, during Professor Janhunen's class on "Marginal Mongolic Languages", I became interested in a little-studied ethnic group in China's north-western Gansu province, called the Dongxiang or Santa. They speak a Mongolic language that reflects Chinese linguistic influence, but culturally they are entirely (and devoutly) Islamic. They are known for having the lowest rate of Chinese literacy among China's ethnic minorities. While no widespread writing system currently exists for the Dongxiang language in everyday life, there is evidence for the historical use of an Arabic script by Islamic religious professionals in mosques and Sufi mausoleums. This paper briefly introduces the different aspects and roles of Arabic writing among Muslims in China, and analyses one short sample of a Dongxiang folk story recorded in Arabic script.

Romanisation systems used include:

Arabic: Deutsches Institut für Normung Romanisation (DIN 31635)

Chinese: Hanyu Pinyin

Dongxiang: Pinyin-based Romanisation system (Dongxiangyu jiyu fuhao), as used in the Dongxiang-Chinese dictionary (DHC) of 2001.

WRITING AMONG THE MUSLIMS IN CHINA

The Arabic script has a sacred status among all Muslims of the world. Accordingly, it also has major symbolic value for Chinese Muslims, even though most of them do not use it in their daily lives. For those Chinese-speaking Hui

Muslims who are literate in Chinese characters, the use of Arabic is reserved only for religious contexts. Even for Hui who never learned this language, quotes from the Quran in Arabic script are considered to have talismanic qualities and are used in rituals (Gladney 1991: 271). Especially in the pious Muslim areas of north-western China, the Chinese vernacular is littered with words of Arabic and Persian origin, often called “Hui speech” (回回话 *Huihuihua*). These words have semi-established spellings in Chinese characters; their original Arabic written forms are rarely used. The users of such words have become oblivious to their foreign origin, having practically turned them into Chinese words such as *gongbei* (*qubba*), *sufei* (*ṣūfī*), *Gedimu* (*qadīm*), and *ahong* (*akhund*). Some terms have even been translated into Chinese, most importantly *qingzhen* (清真 ‘pure and true’), the all-encompassing guideline for a Muslim’s life; this is probably a translation of the terms *ḥalāl* or *ṭahāra* (Gladney 1991: 13).

The majority of Qurans printed in China are bilingual: they include a Chinese translation side by side with the original Arabic. According to Jonathan N. Lipman (1997: 49–50), proper practical knowledge of Arabic among the Hui Muslims started to deteriorate as early as the 1700s, prompting the need for them to create alternative tools for the propagation of religious learning. As an answer to this need, there exists a transcription system for Arabic into Chinese characters. Used in “scripture-hall education” (经堂教育 *jingtang jiaoyu*) in mosques and Quran schools (madrasas), it has come to be known as *jingtangyu*. This writing system was developed during the late Ming dynasty in Shaanxi province by Hu Dengzhou and others. It is used mostly by members of the oldest sect of Chinese Islam, the Gedimu. The pronunciations chosen to represent Arabic are said to be based on “Hui tradition”. The following is a short example of this writing (cf. image 1):

Arabic: يَا مُقَلَّبَ الْقُلُوبِ وَالْأَبْصَارِ يَا خَالِقَ الْآيَاتِ

DIN: yā muqalliba l-qulawubi wa l-labṣāri wa yā ḥaliqa l-layli

Chinese characters (right to left): 力来干力哈牙外，勒阿苏布艾力外，比录古，力白力干木牙

Pinyin: yámùgānlíbáili, gūlùbǐ, wǎili' àibùsū' àlè, wàiyáhāligānláili

All of the characters here seem to belong to the more or less established stock of characters commonly used for transcribing foreign proper names in Chinese. This kind of use of Chinese language in an Islamic context was criticised by the Wahhabi-inspired Ikhwan movement (伊赫瓦尼 *Yihewani*) of Chinese Islam, founded in the late nineteenth century by Ma Wanfu (马万福) from Dongxiang County. Highly critical of Chinese influences on Muslim life, his successors maintain that Islamic knowledge should be acquired directly from Middle-

Image 1 Example of Chinese Xiao'erjing on a Sufi mausoleum wall. The text in the middle reads: ايت ئىك وي ئىك وق *kay tiyan qū giyaw* (Chinese: 开天古教 *kāi tiān gǔ jiào*), literally 'open sky, old faith', approximately this means 'most original religion', a respectful term for Islam in Chinese (October 2004, Hanzeling village, Dongxiang county, Gansu province).



Eastern sources (Gillette 2000: 78). Both Arabic and Chinese script decorations in mosques are typical for the traditional Sufi sects; this practise, too, was considered ostentatious by the Ikhwan (Gladney 1991: 55–56). The Ikhwan supporters usually import their Qurans from the Middle East. Gillette (2000: 101–102) reports that in the mid-1990s, the study of Arabic (both Quranic and modern) was very popular among the old-sect Muslims in Xi'an. This suggests that the study of Arabic may have experienced a renaissance even among urban Chinese Muslims.

Jingtangyu means the writing of Arabic in Chinese, but the opposite – writing Chinese in Arabic – was also needed. This kind of writing system is called *Xiao'erjing* (小儿经, شَيْئُوْ عَرَبِيّ). Alternative names include *xiaojing* (小经), *xiaojing* (消经) and *xiao'erjin* (小儿锦 being the preferred term in north-western China, where local dialects do not distinguish between the finals *n* and *ng*). The name *Xiao'erjing* means 'children's script', perhaps denoting that it was originally intended as a pedagogical tool for children. According to another view, the original name for the system should be *xiaojing* (消经), 'digest the scripture', indicating

that it was created for religious purposes (Feng Zenglie 1982: 37). In any case, the script is culturally appropriate for Chinese Muslims to use. Indeed, it is the first known phonetic writing system for Chinese, dating back to approximately the mid-Ming.

When used to write Chinese, the Xiao'erjing has a rather established orthography to represent Mandarin Chinese initials and finals with minimal dialectal variation. Tones are not marked, except the so-called entering tone. Apart from Chinese and its many dialects, the two non-Sinitic languages that have been written using the Xiao'erjing are Dongxiang and Salar. Among the Salar, the Xiao'erjing is known as “Turkic script”. In China, the Xiao'erjing script has been researched most notably by Feng Zenglie (冯增烈). A text from Kashgar was analysed by A. Forke (1907). Olga I. Zavyalova (1999) has been conducting some research on this in Russia. Today in Japan, Kazuhiko Machida (町田和彦) is directing the digitisation of Xiao'erjing manuscripts. Good examples of the Chinese Xiao'erjing can be found on the project's website.

THE DONGXIANG

The original area of the Dongxiang ethnic group is the Dongxiang Autonomous County (东乡族自治县 *Dongxiangzuzhixian*), which is located in Linxia prefecture, Gansu province. Some small enclaves exist in nearby areas and a more distant diaspora group in Xinjiang's Yili River valley. These are believed to have originated with the group of artisans, merchants, and soldiers who relocated to Gansu from Central Asia during the Yuan period. Despite the PRC policy of fabricating unique ethnic traits, the Dongxiang seem culturally practically identical to the Hui Muslims (i.e. “Islamic culture with Chinese characteristics”). Minor vestiges of their Mongol, Turk, or Persian past may remain in their customs. Before being officially categorised with the ethnonym *Dongxiang* (meaning ‘Eastern villagers’, in relation to the city of Linxia) in the 1950s, they were often called “the Mongolian Hui”. Even now, the Dongxiang see little difference between themselves and the Hui Muslims. Their native ethnonym *santa*, (originally *sarta*, a term referring to traders in Central Asia) basically means ‘Muslim’, denoting all Muslims and not just the Dongxiang themselves. This ambiguity presents a major dilemma when evaluating the nature of their ethnic identity.

The Dongxiang language is clearly a Mongolic language, belonging to the “Monguor” or “Shirongolic” group. The core vocabulary and grammatical markers are of Mongolic origin, though often rather archaic and phonologically mostly adapted to the local Chinese dialect. Furthermore, Field (1997: viii) believes the language contains a Turkic substrate, as evidenced by its word stress patterns and

certain vocabulary. There are a considerable number of loan-words from Chinese, which are not in any way restricted. The small stock of Arabic-Persian loanwords, however, belongs solely to the realm of Islamic religion and culture (Kim 2003: 362).

The Dongxiang have a reputation for being the most illiterate, undereducated and backward minority nationality of China. Basic education in the native language is still rare, while the quality of Chinese schools is very substandard, due to the limited command of Chinese by both pupils and teachers (Wang Jiayi & Postiglione 2008: 183–187). The Chinese school curriculum is considered worthless by most Dongxiang, who opt instead to attend Quran schools. The few Dongxiang that have received a formal Chinese education, and can therefore be classified as officially literate, are viewed with suspicion among the typical, uneducated rural Dongxiang. On the other hand, the reputation of being “China’s most illiterate” is a source of annoyance for some of the Dongxiang intellectuals. In fact, among religious professionals knowledge of texts in Arabic and Persian is relatively widespread. Although there are reports that male literacy in Arabic would be as high as 80% (Legerton & Rawson 2009), it is uncertain whether the rural Dongxiang really consider it necessary to actually learn Arabic beyond a very superficial level. It is likely that this is reserved only for mullahs.



Image 2 Example of phonetic interpretation of Arabic script in Chinese characters, as used in *jingtang jiaoyu* (Oct. 2004, Tangwangchuan village, Dongxiang County, Gansu province).

It is reported that the Xiao'erjing script has been in use among the Dongxiang for 300 years. While it is unclear how exactly the usage of Xiao'erjing was transmitted to the Dongxiang, obviously Dongxiang religious professionals first learned it when among Hui colleagues as a means of transcribing Chinese. It was then used for memorising folk stories, religious knowledge and casual notes.

In Xinjiang, the official Arabic orthography for Uyghur is widely used. Members of the diaspora group of Dongxiang residing in Xinjiang are usually fluent in Uyghur (Chen Wenxiang 2007: 96–97), though it is unknown how many are literate in it and may be readapting this orthography to their own language.

ORTHOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE *MILAGAHEI* (米拉尕黑, MILA GAGVI 'LITTLE BROTHER'), AS PRINTED IN MA ZIXIANG & MA ZHAOXI (2000): [VII]

The only sample of Dongxiang Xiao'erjing script easily found in print is a lyrical folk story known as the “Milagahei”. Without access to the original manuscript, however, only the very beginning of the story is readily available for analysis of the Xiao'erjing script. Further work in the field and archives of Gansu will hopefully reveal more material. Until then, this analysis must remain sketchy and fragmentary.

The oral version of the story is recorded, transcribed and analysed by Huhbars in Buhe (1987: 101–126); it is also adapted into Chinese by Ma Zixiang & Ma Zhaoxi (2000: 221–241). The story has most recently been analysed by Bai Xiaorong (2010), who compares it to the famous novel “History of the Soul” (心灵史 *Xinlingshi*) by Zhang Chengzhi. It dates back to the Ming era and is described as a “politico-romantic” story (Ma Zixiang 2005: 106).

Romanization:

bismi -llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm
 ḥudā buža sa milāqa
 ġi ġayā wa šinžin buža
 br mağilu ṭawza ġa-
 yā wa muršid buža
 qādu maka ġayā wa mi
 lāqaği māğilu ṭawzi

Original Arabic Script:

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ
 حُدَا بُزَّ سَمَ لَا قَ
 غَ جَ یَاوْ شِیْرُ بُزَّ
 بَرْمَاجَ لُوْتُوْظَ جَ
 یَا وَ مَرشِدْبُ رْ
 قَادُمْ كَجَ یَا وَ مَ
 لَاقَ خَ مَاجَ لُوْتُوْظَ

ni milāqāgi ninšān
 qaḡi awqiyā milāqā
 kāntu bāzā da čān
 ri hāla aḡi milāqaḡiā
 mayāntayā lānḡi hūan
 ḡi hūanba niyāša
 qūlūfa qādu maka

'asāna ḡi mayāntayān
 sa lān ḡ hūdā ḡimada
 yan bmār tu qa wa
 māṭa ni kūši hiw hū an
 qa sa kantu maza ni
 čānri hāla aḡisa maḡi
 tawza milāqā da 'asana

ن م لَاقَاغِنِ شَانُ
 ق ج اَوْ ق ي ا م لَاقَا
 كَانُ تْ بَاذَادَ چَانُ
 ر خ ا لَ ا ج م لَاقَا غَا
 مَيَّا ثَيَّا لَانُ ج حُوَانُ
 ج حُوَانُ بِي ن ي ا ش
 قُولُو فَا قَا دُمَا ك

اَسَا نَ ج مَيَّا ثَيَّا
 سَ لَانُ ج خَدَا ج مَدَا
 يَانُ بَمَار تْ ق وَا
 مَاظَن كُو صِر جُو حُو اَنُ
 ق سَ كُن تْ مَا زَا ن
 چَان رِخَا لَا ا ج سَ مَا ج
 تُو ظ م لَاقَا دَا غَ سَا نَ

Interpretation in Dongxiang pinyin:

Bisiminlia rahemani rahim.
 Huda benrense Milagagvi zhayawo.
 Shenren benren bar Mazhilu xiaojie zhayawo
 Murishid benren ghadun mekie zhayawo
 Milagagvi Mazhilu xiaojieni Milagagvi nienshan giezhe ogiye
 Milaga Kantu bazade canri hala echi
 Milaqaḡvi a, mienxian lanzhi honzhi honbiao nienshe gholuwo.
 Ghadun mekie asane:
 “Chi mianxianse lanzhi Huda chimade yan biemartu giewo?”
 “Majiani kusi haihan giese Kantu bazani canri hala echisan.”
 Mazhi xiaojie Milagade asane...

(Underlined are words whose exact form or meaning is uncertain, and that are not included in DHC or glossaries by Buhe (1983) and Todaeva (1961). The word *canri* could possibly be from Chinese cānjūn 参军 ‘join the army’, recorded as *canjin* in DHC.)

Translation:

(Arabic:) In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful.
 The Lord himself creates Milagagvi.
 The Holy One himself creates young lady Mazhilu.
 The Guide himself creates a mother-in-law.
 Milagagvi is given the promise of marrying the young lady Mazhilu.
 Milagagvi goes to Kuangtong town to join the army.
 The colour of Milagagvi's face becomes like yellow paper.
 Mother-in-law asks: "Your face is so yellow, what illness did God give you?"
 "The people of Ma family betrayed me, so I went to Kuangtong town to join the army."
 Young lady Mazhi asks Milaga ...

COMMENTS

As is traditional in early Arabic manuscripts, the text lacks all punctuation and words are sometimes divided into different lines. Word-boundaries are difficult to distinguish, although Arabic script normally does acknowledge them. Syllable-boundaries are often distinguished in a way that breaks many orthographic rules of Arabic, especially in the case of grammatical suffixes that tend to be written separately. The application of Arabic script to the phonemic system of Dongxiang language seems to be inconsistent and limited. Traditionally, the Arabic script has only three diacritics for vowels (*ḥarakāt*). These are employed in Dongxiang orthography, although the Dongxiang spoken language is considered to have five different vowels (*a, e, i, o, u*). It seems that the vowel /a/ is predominantly represented in the script by the long vowel \bar{a} , whereas the short \acute{a} can also denote the phoneme /e/. The phoneme /o/ is represented by both \bar{a} and \acute{u} (as well as by \acute{a} *aw*, in one example). Regarding Chinese loanwords, Dongxiang orthography retains the Chinese Xiao'erjing practise of using the diacritic *tanwīn* for the phoneme /n/ in syllable-final position.

The usage of consonants is more consistent. Two letters are borrowed from the Perso-Arabic script: \check{c} and \check{z} , with the latter being used only in Chinese loanwords to substitute for the pinyin *r* and the former presumably corresponding to pinyin *c*. Many inaccuracies remain, however: the letter \check{q} is used for both /g/ and /gh/, and the letter \check{g} is used for both /zh/ and /ch/. Many letters are unfortunately lacking in this short sample, making it impossible to determine whether the script distinguishes between /b/ and /p/, for example.

The opening Basmala in Arabic is not written in its traditional Quranic form, but in a more modern orthographic style without any vowel diacritics; the same applies for a few Arabic loanwords (e.g. مرشد *muršid* 'guide'). In the manuscript, the combination of the letters *lām* and 'alif is not written with the ligature (لا); it only appears in the above reproduction because of its automatic use in Arabic computer fonts.

Grammatical categories here follow Kim (2003). Compared to Buhe's oral version, the text appears to simplify some grammatical structures, especially verbal forms. We can find the following suffixes:

- imperfective converb *-zhi*, written ج *ǧi*. (furthermore, the personal pronoun *chi* 'you' is written *ǧi*)
- terminative finite tense *-wo*, written و *wa*. (the copula *wo* can also sometimes be interpreted)
- durative finite tense *-ne*, written ن *na*
- voluntative imperative *-ye*, written ي *ya*
- ablative case *-se*, written س *sa* (the perfective participle *-san* also seems to be written *sa*)
- locative case *-de*, written د *da*
- genitive/accusative case *-ni*, written ن *ni*

The story contains two proper names: the story's protagonist, *Milagahei*, and his love interest, *Mazhilu* (interpreted by Huhbars as *Ma Chenglong* 马成龙). There is also the place name *Kantu*, interpreted by Huhbars as *Kuangtong* (匡通). It is uncertain which actual locality this refers to, although it could be interpreted as *Gāndōng* 甘东 'Eastern Gansu'. God is mentioned three times with different names: in Persian (*huda*), in Chinese (*shèngrén*), and in Arabic (*murishid*).

The text contains many Chinese loanwords with peculiar orthography, especially as vowels are concerned. For example, one finds:

- buža* ~ *běnrén* (本人) 'this person', 'oneself'
- šinžin* ~ *shèngrén* (圣人) 'holy person'
- tawzi* ~ *xiǎojiě* (小姐) 'young lady', 'miss'
- mayāntayan* ~ *miànxiàng* (面相) 'face'
- nīyāša* ~ *yánsè* (颜色) 'colour' or *yǎnsè* (眼色) 'facial expression'
- hūāngǐ hūānba* ~ *huángzhǐ huángbiǎo* (黄纸黄表) 'ceremonial flammable yellow paper'
- mata* ~ *Mǎjiā* (马家) 'Ma family'

The Xiao'erjing orthography is notorious for being very unsystematic. This one short text is certainly not sufficient to make any far-fetching conclusions about its application to the Dongxiang language. Some of the orthographic “features” may actually be mistakes by the scribe. Furthermore, because the source does not indicate in any way the age and origin of the manuscript, it is impossible to assess to what extent the system possibly used nowadays is concurrent with this sample. We may speculate on the purpose of creating a manuscript of such a well-known piece of oral folklore. The text seems to summarise the plot in a brief fashion, leaving out most of the poetic devices that occur in the oral version recorded by Buhe. Since Ma Zixiang & Ma Zhaoxi do not offer any information about its origin, there is also the possibility that the manuscript is not authentic (i.e. fabricated for the purpose of demonstrating that Xiao'erjing texts exist among the Dongxiang).

In order to improve the illiteracy rate among the Dongxiang, a viable writing system for their native language is necessary. The usage of Xiao'erjing has become all but extinct among the Hui Muslims, due to their current high level of literacy in Chinese characters. While the current situation about the usage of Xiao'erjing is unknown among the Dongxiang, it can also be presumed to have nearly disappeared. Nevertheless, it may still present potential for any attempts to create a modern writing system for the Dongxiang. Although the Dongxiang are often aware of the Mongolic roots of their native language, any idea of using the written Mongol script is culturally out of place. The recently developed pinyin-based system is very practical, but it remains to be seen if it really can be accepted by the Dongxiang.

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