

# Confucian Thought and the Localization of Islamic Civilization in MilāGhākh

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**Abstract:** The Dongxiang epic MilāGhākh is rooted in the ethnic group's ancient oral traditions—including legends, stories, and folk songs—and has been continuously enriched throughout history. Its formation was profoundly influenced by Confucian thought, while the introduction of Islam and the intellectual practice of "interpreting the classics through Confucianism" laid a cultural foundation for its dissemination in the Dongxiang region. This epic not only embodies the Dongxiang people's pursuit of freedom, eternity, and Islamic truth, but also stands as an outstanding example of the localization of Islam in China and the fusion of civilizations.

**Keywords:** Confucian thought; Interpreting the classics through Confucianism; Localization

## 1. Introduction

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, a number of Hui Confucian scholars well-versed in Chinese culture emerged. Their approach of "interpreting the classics through Confucianism" profoundly contributed to the development of a distinctive Chinese Islamic theological system, enriched the pluralistic structure of Chinese culture, and strengthened the components of Chinese civilization. By integrating Islamic teachings with Confucian culture, these scholars facilitated the blending of Islam into the fabric of Chinese society, enabling Islam to become part of Chinese culture. Throughout this process of absorbing foreign influences, Chinese civilization maintained its uniqueness and continuity.

As Quan Wei (2009) observes, "From the perspective of core Islamic teachings among the Dongxiang, Chinese Islam has adhered to fundamental Islamic beliefs while also absorbing traditional Confucian thought." The Dongxiang epic MilāGhākh serves as a localized exemplar of the integration of Islamic and Chinese civilizations, showcasing a regionally distinct Islamic culture. The concept of "localization" emphasizes interactive and constructive cultural dialogue. Confucian thought, which encapsulates the essence of traditional Chinese culture and embodies millennia of wisdom, is richly reflected in MilāGhākh.

The Dongxiang scholar Ma Zhiyong's illustrated version of MilāGhākh recounts the following story: "The hunter MilāGhākh shoots down a piece of the moon with an arrow, obtaining a magical mirror, called moon mirror. He falls in love with the image of a girl reflected in it and, guided by a wise elder, finds her—Miss Mazhilu. They exchange tokens and vow to marry the following year. However, war breaks out, and MilāGhākh has to ride off to defend Kantunbazade against foreign invaders. He is away for eighteen years. The villain Ma Chenglong, coveting Mazhilu's beauty, repeatedly proposes marriage but is rejected by her and her mother. He tricks them into drinking a potion that erases their memories and sets a wedding date. On the eve of Milagahai's victorious

return, he has three mysterious dreams. After having them interpreted by a sage, he rides a divine horse to the wedding, cleverly rescues Mazhilu, and uses the mirror to restore her memory. The lovers are finally reunited."

This story reflects the cultural essence of the Dongxiang people and demonstrates the permeation of Confucian values. From MilāGhākh's defense of his homeland to Mazhilu's unwavering fidelity, and his rejection of the king's offer, the epic embodies Confucian virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, and respect for ritual.

## **2. Confucian Thought in MilāGhākh**

### ***2.1 The Concept of Benevolence***

Benevolence is the cornerstone of Confucian doctrine, essentially meaning to love others. This love expresses human emotion—extending from love for family to love for all people and all things in nature. The Analects state: "A man should be dutiful to his parents at home, respectful toward his elders in society, discreet in conduct and trustworthy in speech, show care for others extensively, and keep company with the humane and virtuous." Confucianism emphasizes a gradation of love, beginning with one's family and expanding outward to society and the natural world. Mencius summarized this as "loving one's family, caring for the people, and nurturing all things." The epic MilāGhākh deeply embodies this Confucian spirit of benevolence.

#### ***2.1.1 Love for Family***

MilāGhākh's decision to leave his beloved and defend his homeland for eighteen years demonstrates profound dedication to his family. His unwavering loyalty to Mazhilu, even when offered immense wealth and power by the emperor, reflects the Confucian ideal of remaining unmoved by wealth or force.

In Confucian culture, marital fidelity is a crucial foundation of marriage. Husbands are expected to remain devoted, upholding the sanctity and stability of marriage. MilāGhākh's steadfastness over eighteen years exemplifies this Confucian virtue, showcasing his respect for his wife and firm moral convictions.

#### ***2.2 Love for Others and the Nation***

MilāGhākh's story extends beyond personal and familial love to a broader sense of responsibility toward community and society. Confucian "benevolence" advocates expanding love from family to society, ultimately embracing all things. Mencius's idea of "loving one's family, caring for the people, and nurturing all things" is vividly embodied in MilāGhākh's sacrifice of personal happiness for the greater good.

Confucian social ethics emphasize the integration of individual and societal values, linking personal fate to the nation's destiny. Although individual life is finite, the development of society and the nation is enduring.

Achieving benevolence requires long-term cultivation and self-discipline. Historical figures who attained greatness often possessed deep reserves of benevolence, enabling them to suppress selfish desires and dedicate themselves to higher causes.

### ***2.3 The Concept of Ritual***

"It is through learning and practicing ritual that one disciplines his own desires and becomes a moral being. The sages instructed mankind by means of ritual, enabling people to align themselves with its norms, thereby bringing about harmony and ordered peace in society." [2] In Confucianism, ritual encompasses not only everyday etiquette but also the systems, norms, and moral principles of ancient society. Ritual serves as a behavioral guide, teaching people how to act appropriately in various social contexts, including showing respect and observing customs. The practice of ritual is essential not only for the individual but also for maintaining social order and harmony.

When troubled by three mysterious dreams, MilāGhākh seeks out a wise elder, beginning their interaction with "Salam Alaykum", a respectful greeting. This reflects the Confucian emphasis on ritual as both an external code of conduct and an internal moral cultivation. MilāGhākh's actions demonstrate respect for elders, reverence for knowledge, and adherence to propriety.

Confucius defined benevolence through ritual, emphasizing the need to overcome personal desires and abide by ritual norms. After his military victories, MilāGhākh is offered the emperor's daughter and a high title but declines, remaining faithful to his vow with Mazhilu. He exercises self-restraint, adhering to "ritual" by resisting temptation.

The emperor, impressed by MilāGhākh's loyalty and mindful of social norms, ultimately respects this decision. Even the villain Ma Chenglong, though desiring Mazhilu, does not resort to force, avoiding social disorder. This illustrates how "ritual" serves as a cornerstone of social order.

#### **2.4 The Concept of Trustworthiness**

The Analects state: "Without trustworthiness, one cannot stand. Just as a large carriage cannot move without its yoke, a small carriage cannot move without its crossbar." Trustworthiness refers to honesty in conduct and consistency in word and deed. Confucius emphasized that ritual is to society what the yoke is to the cart: not merely useful, but essential, and he considered "trustworthiness" is the foundation of personhood, essential for navigating life and achieving success.

MilāGhākh and Mazhilu exchange tokens and vow to marry, yet war keeps them apart for eighteen years. It is their mutual promise and trustworthiness that enables MilāGhākh to refuse the emperor's offers.

Even after drinking a memory-erasing potion, Mazhilu waits faithfully, driven by deep love and trust. Similarly, her mother upholds her promise, refusing other suitors and protecting her daughter's future. Her steadfastness demonstrates profound trustworthiness.

As a core Confucian value, "trustworthiness" profoundly influences personal conduct and social order. The mutual trust between MilāGhākh, Mazhilu, and her mother not only shapes their upright characters but also provides spiritual support for building harmonious social relationships.

### **3. The Introduction of Islam and "Interpreting the Classics Through Confucianism": Paving the Way for MilāGhākh's Development in the Dongxiang Region**

Islam was introduced to China during the Tang Dynasty via the Silk Roads. This process exemplifies the inclusiveness of Chinese civilization and reflects centuries of economic and cultural exchange. Over time, Islam became the major faith of ten ethnic minorities, including the Hui and Dongxiang. Thanks to the strong appeal and inclusivity of Chinese civilization, Islam's spread in China facilitated deep integration between Islamic culture and local Chinese culture.

During the Yuan and Ming dynasties, Islam faced challenges in China due to scarce scriptures and few scholars. However, by the late Ming and early Qing periods, Hui Confucian scholars such as

Wang Daiyu, Ma Zhu, Liu Zhi, and Ma Dexin emerged. They engaged in translating classics and writing, exploring points of convergence between Confucian and Islamic values, and promoting the idea that "Islam and Confucianism share the same origin and principles." This approach, known as "interpreting the classics through Confucianism," was a significant effort to adapt Islam to Chinese society and national conditions.

As Professor Man Ke notes, "unlike Muslims in traditional theocratic Islamic states, the Dongxiang people live within the heartland of Confucian civilization." [3] They practice a Sinicized form of Islam that has undergone extensive exchange and integration with traditional Chinese culture. "Upon entering different regional societies, Islam adapted to local cultural contexts, integrating into indigenous cultures to gain understanding and create a suitable environment for its development." [4]

"The prototype of the MilāGhākh story is believed to stem from a war during the westward migration of the Central Asian Sarta people." [5] It may be inferred that this story likely dates back to the 13th century—the period of Genghis Khan's westward expeditions. Sufism was introduced to Dongxiang after the rise of Khufiyyah. Thus, before Sufism's arrival, MilāGhākh had already circulated widely among the people.

Within the Dongxiang region, the recitation of MilāGhākh is primarily concentrated within the Khufiyyah Muftī. The version they recite conveys a Sufi mystical love story, emphasizing that Sufi practitioners must pass through a spiritual guide to attain union with the Divine. Compared to literary versions, the themes and plots are similar, but the sacred and secular emphases differ. This suggests that the Khufiyyah Muftī skillfully integrated MilāGhākh with Sufism, making the Persian-language Beyt more accessible to the Dongxiang people by aligning with their cultural traditions.

In summary, the work of Hui Confucian scholars like Wang Daiyu, Ma Zhu, Liu Zhi, and Ma Dexin in "interpreting the classics through Confucianism" was not mere translation but a profound cultural and philosophical dialogue. They not only used Confucian vocabulary to explain Islamic teachings but also enriched Chinese philosophy with Islamic insights. Their works, *The True Explanation of the Orthodox Faith* and *The Great Learning of Islam* systematically interpreted Islamic civilization using classical Chinese, representing a unique achievement in world intellectual history. By emphasizing the unity of "loyalty to the ruler" and Islamic "faithfulness," and integrating "filial piety" with "self-cultivation," this successful cultural practice provided a cultural "grammar" for Dongxiang expressions like MilāGhākh, enabling them to remain true to Islamic core beliefs while engaging with mainstream Chinese culture, thus opening broad paths for their transmission and development.

#### **4. MilāGhākh as a Manifestation of the Localization of Sufi Literature**

In the 13th century, following Genghis Khan's western expeditions, many Central Asian Sarta people migrated to China with the army, settling in the Lin Tao area near Dongxiang of Gansu Province. To protect the Central Asian Passage and defend against Tibet, a military force composed primarily of Hui Semu people (Muslim groups from Central Asia who were classified under the Semu category during the Yuan dynasty) under Mongol rule was stationed in Dongxiang—an area then rich in forests and grasslands, suitable for farming and herding. These soldiers were incorporated into the Tammachi troops (Genghis Khan's vanguard/garrison army), providing logistical support during wars and farming in peacetime. As warfare declined, they integrated into

local society, marrying local women and raising families. Over centuries, they interacted extensively with local Hui, Han, Mongol, and Tibetan groups, gradually forming a new ethnic group with unique cultural characteristics.

Starting from the Qing Dynasty, Islamic religious literature, particularly Sufi literature, became widely popular among the Dongxiang. Sufi literature refers to literary works—poetry, prose, stories—used by Sufi mystical leaders and followers to express their faith, philosophy, inner spiritual journey, and experiences. Initially, "Sufi texts were translated into the Dongxiang vernacular or transcribed in the form of Xiaojing script—a writing system that employs Arabic letters to phonetically represent the Dongxiang language, by Khufiyyah Mufti leaders, Imams and professional preachers from classical Arabic or Persian al-kitāb for public sermons" [6].

During this period, some Dongxiang Imams and religious scholars began adapting this form to local conditions. They moved beyond the confines of the mosque, where Arabic and Persian poems had traditionally been recited aloud, and began composing and performing religious poetry in their own Dongxiang language—works imbued with their ethnic identity and modeled after the Persian Beyt form. In the 18th century, various Sufi branches spread to Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai from Central Asia via Xinjiang or from the Arab world. They fused with Confucian thought and the feudal patriarchal system, forming Menhuan (Sufi orders within Sunni Islam in Chinese). Since then, the term Menhuan has become the general designation for Sufi orders in these regions.

Prevalent in the Dongxiang region, MilāGhākh recited within the Mufuti Menhuan as one of the ten majors Beyt chanted during religious ceremonies activities, carries strong Sufi stylistic features, imbuing its content with symbolic and metaphorical meaning. Religious personnel used Xiaojing script not only to transcribe foreign scriptures into Dongxiang but also for religious education, commentary, note-taking, and even writing works. According to Chen Yuanlong, The Dongxiang Xiaojing script was created under the strong influence and inspiration of the Hui Xiaojing script [7].

This script provided a mediatic foundation) for the recording, transmission, and reinterpretation of religious poetry like MilāGhākh, enabling originally abstruse Persian Beyt to be widely disseminated and accepted among the Dongxiang faithful. Through the religious performative contexts provided by menhuan and the written form of "Xiaojing," works like MilāGhākh not only promoted the local flourishing of Islamic literature in Dongxiang but also facilitated the deep integration of Islamic civilization with local Chinese culture.

It is worth emphasizing that "Chinese Muslims' use of 'Xiaojing' letters to spell Chinese was a major attempt at the Sinicization or localization of Islamic culture and an important step toward recognizing Han culture." [8] This reflected both an acceptance of Han culture and a sense of agency in cultural adaptation, playing a historical role in religious text translation and folk literacy.

Today, the use of Dongxiang-language "Xiaojing" has diminished somewhat. It is primarily used for recording and chanting religious Dongxiang poetry and for correspondence and accounting. Even though those who preserve and recite may not be proficient in Chinese, they are skilled at recording and copying Xiaojing Beyt. Differences in individual understanding lead to variations in recorded and copied content. Even inheritors of MilāGhākh might not fully understand others Xiaojing manuscripts. It can be said that without the aid of Dongxiang Xiaojing script, the transmission of the epic MilāGhākh within the Dongxiang would face significant challenges.

## 5. Conclusion

Sufi literature spread from Persia to China and further into the Dongxiang region. Dongxiang

religious figures, including Imam and preachers, used Dongxiang Xiaojing script and language to integrate Sufi literature with local Dongxiang culture, social environment, and historical traditions. This allowed Sufi literature to take root in Dongxiang, developing a regionally distinctive Islamic culture and endowing MilāGhākh with new religious significance. The Confucian ideas of benevolence, ritual and trustworthiness reflected in MilāGhākh resonate with the cultural psychology and values of the Dongxiang people, aligning with China's governance model that integrates politics and religion. This process of localization has not only enriched the religious literature of the Dongxiang but also demonstrates the diversity and adaptability of Islamic civilization in its global spread.

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