

UNCONTRIVED CONCORD: THE ECLECTIC SOURCES AND SYNCRETIC THEORIES OF LIU ZHI, A CHINESE MUSLIM SCHOLAR

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As minorities in an overwhelmingly non-Islamic environment, Muslims in China have faced challenges and pressures quite different from other Muslims in the world. Their existence in and interactions with a hegemonic Chinese civilization have caused some scholars to characterize all Chinese Muslim interactions with the Chinese culture and society in terms of either retaliation to or assimilation in the Chinese world order. This 'conflict or concord' interpretation of the encounters of Chinese Muslims with the dominant Chinese civilization around them is a generalization that seeks to reduce complex and dynamic historical circumstances and events to a simple binary choice. It is flawed, not because it is altogether untrue, but because it is incomplete. It is unable to depict, let alone explain, the individual and communal motivations that produced the diverse responses of Chinese Muslims to the social and cultural context in which they lived. It is not that conflict and concord are not prominent features of Chinese Muslim history; they certainly are. But these two shades are simply too stark to portray the richness of this colourful history. The concord, or harmonization, that many observe in the writings of the Chinese Muslim literati elite was not the result of some well-thought-out conspiracy. Rather, it was the organic product of individual minds, acting in a communal and generational context, in an effort to make sense of a hybrid intellectual, cultural and religious heritage.

The Chinese Muslim scholars of the late Ming (1368–1644) and early Qing (1644–1911) periods produced a body of literature collectively called the *Han Kitāb*, a name that combines the Chinese word *Han*, referring to the Chinese language, with the Arabic word *kitāb*, meaning 'book'. Thus, quite aptly, the term refers to books about Islamic belief and practice written in classical Chinese, and therefore highly evocative of and influenced by Confucian thought. Liu Zhi (*ca.* 1660–*ca.* 1730) and the other Chinese Muslim scholars who contributed to the *Han Kitāb* canon, both before and after him, did not deliberately or explicitly

promote an agenda of reconciliation of Islam and Confucianism. Their writings reflect a tacit attempt to portray themselves, their community and their faith as ‘orthodox’, but we have no reason to suspect any ulterior motive. Their purpose was to educate readers, both Sinicized Muslims and curious non-Muslim literati, about Islam. That they did so in the language of Neo-Confucianism reflects their heritage and history, in other words their simultaneity. They were simultaneously Chinese and Muslim. And since they saw no discord within themselves, they also saw no need to create concord. Their integrated self-perception was transparently reflected in their self-representation as scholars of a learned tradition that recognized its dual lineage through the Sage Confucius and the Prophet of Islam, whose roots ultimately lay in the same divine source of wisdom and moral order. Their almost seamless integration of Islamic and Chinese religious and philosophical concepts shows the *Han Kitāb* literature to be the heir of the rich literary traditions of both civilizations, just as their authors themselves were hybrid products of centuries of genetic interbreeding and cultural cross-pollination. Their writings demonstrate, therefore, a syncretism of diverse elements drawn from an eclectic array of sources, some considered more ‘orthodox’ than others. This is perhaps epitomized by the work of Liu Zhi, the most prolific, and arguably the most systematic, of the *Han Kitāb* scholars.

Liu Zhi’s body of work is impressive, not only in its size, but also in the breadth of topics it covers. We cannot possibly examine it in its entirety here, so we shall focus on three books that he acknowledged as his most important. These books constitute Liu Zhi’s *Tianfang* trilogy, so-called because the word *Tianfang* appears in each title. (*Tianfang* is an ancient Chinese name for the Ka’ba in Makka, but applied more generally to Arabia—the Chinese translation of *The Arabian Nights* is called *Tianfang Yetan*—and then poetically by *Han Kitāb* authors to refer to anything associated with the foundations of Islam.) Liu Zhi’s trilogy comprises the *Tianfang Xingli*, *Tianfang Dianli* and *Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu*. The first of these may be translated as *Metaphysics of Islam*, followed by *Ritual Law of Islam*, and finally *True Record of The Ultimate Sage of Islam*, a biography of the Prophet. Liu Zhi viewed these works as a systematic unfolding of ideas. In an essay included in his last major work, he explained how these three books were to be read in concert to complete a grand study of the ‘meta-concepts’ of Islam. Thus he wrote: ‘As far as these books are concerned, they are three yet actually constitute one whole. They were published in incremental steps as I attained mastery over them.’¹

¹ Liu Zhi, ‘Zhu Shu Shu’ in Shouyi Bai (ed.), *Huizu Renwu Zhi (Qingdai)* (Yinchuan: Ningxia People’s Press, 1992), 357.

We cannot be sure that when he began writing the *Xingli* Liu Zhi intended it to be the first in a trilogy intended to ‘show the whole world the evidence of the Way in its entirety.’² Whether or not he had this in mind from the start, it is clear that when he viewed his career retrospectively, he wished to leave as part of his legacy the impression of systematic forethought. It would be difficult to say that he considered any one of the books to be more important than the others. Rather, it seems clear that he wished to portray them as coequal parts of a *magnum opus* in which he would present a comprehensive and authoritative view of Islam. He wrote that ‘The *Dianli* is a book that explains the Teaching. The *Xingli* is a book that explains the Way. This edition, the *Zhisheng* [*Shi*]lu, is intended to explain the origin of the sources of the Teaching and the Way.’³

Emphasizing the notions of sources and origins was extremely important to Liu Zhi in his effort to present Islam as authentic, orthodox and legitimate. This also helps to explain why he was the first *Han Kitāb* writer to publish lists of his Islamic textual sources in his books. Bibliographies were also a recognized symbol of erudition among Chinese literati, and incorporating them raised the standard of Chinese Islamic scholarship, especially in the eighteenth century when they became an important part of the *Kaozheng*, or Textual Studies, movement within Confucian circles.

The bibliographies Liu Zhi included in the *Xingli* and *Dianli* provide lists of his Islamic sources, whereas his classical Chinese sources are left to the literary reader to infer via quotations and oblique allusions throughout his texts. Liu Zhi’s sources clearly demonstrate his roots in the ‘orthodox’ literature of both the Islamic and Confucian traditions, in keeping with the standard *Jingtang Jiaoyu* (lit. ‘scripture hall education’) Chinese Muslim curriculum. Yet among the works he cited there are also a number of examples of sources outside the two ‘orthodox’ canons. Like his fellow Nanjing native, Wang Daiyu (ca. 1570–ca. 1660), before him, Liu Zhi admitted Sufi texts into his bibliographies, and frequently alluded to Daoist and Buddhist concepts in Chinese.

Liu Zhi’s unprecedented use of such diverse texts could have led more conservative Confucians or Muslims to question the orthodoxy of some of his sources. From the Chinese side of his intellectual heritage, Liu Zhi quoted liberally from the various canons of the Three Teachings, including ideas deemed ‘heterodox’ by the Confucian establishment. In his introduction to the *Dianli*, he explicitly stated that the book was written for ‘the reader who thoroughly understands and practices the

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Three Teachings, but has never known the rites of our Teaching [i.e., Islam].⁴ Liu Zhi's brief reference to the Three Teachings conveys a view consistent with the largely conciliatory religious philosophical discourse of the period, especially in cosmopolitan Nanjing, where syncretic trends were well established. So, this idea of concord was not necessarily one instituted by the *Han Kitāb* scholars, but rather one that they absorbed from the cultural milieu around them.

Liu Zhi's co-option of ideas from diverse sources had precedents within both the Confucian and Islamic traditions. It recalled the co-option of Daoist and Buddhist concepts by the Song and Ming dynasty Neo-Confucian masters. From an Islamic perspective, Liu Zhi's methodology was also reminiscent of the activities of the medieval Muslim theologians who laboured to reconcile elements of Hellenistic philosophy with the Qur'ānic revelation. Liu Zhi extended this notion of the validity of diverse sources to a greater extent than most of his fellow *Han Kitāb* scholars. It led him to treat the texts of multiple traditions, including rival schools of thought within those traditions as potential support for his ideas.

Just as Liu Zhi brought views from virtually all of the major Chinese religio-philosophical traditions into a comparative and sometimes syncretic Chinese Islamic discourse, he did not discriminate among his Islamic sources, which represent multiple genres. Included in his bibliographies, in addition to the Qur'ān, there are Qur'ānic commentaries (*tafsīr*); a *ḥadīth* collection; various works of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*); manuals on Muslim praxis; books on the life of the Prophet (*sīra*), and other prophets and saints; several texts on Sufi philosophy and devotion; and a number of philological, geographical and astronomical works.

Donald Leslie and Mohamed Wassel have identified nearly all of the sixty-six⁵ titles listed by Liu Zhi in bibliographies in the *Xingli* and *Dianli*. Their findings led to the following conclusions about Liu Zhi's Islamic sources:

1. Many of the texts, especially those (originally written) in Arabic, are standard Sunni Hanafite texts of law and ritual...
2. Very few if any are Shī'a. However, the Kubrāwīya sect, Sunni but with Shī'a connections, is prominent.

⁴ Liu Zhi, 'Liyān' in *Tianfang Dianli Zeyao Jie* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Muslim Propagation Society, repr. 1971), b3.

⁵ There may actually be sixty-seven or sixty-eight, depending on whether some are repeated under slightly different names or not. Donald Daniel Leslie and Mohamed Wassel, 'Arabic and Persian Sources used by Liu Chih', *Central Asiatic Journal* 26/1-2 (1982): 78-104, at 78.

3. Many works, especially those in Persian, are Sufi. Besides the Kubrāwīya, the influence of the Naqshabandi Sufi Jāmī is evident.
4. There are almost certainly more works in Persian listed than in Arabic.
5. Most are almost certainly extant in the west...
6. We may postulate a link with Central Asian Muslim sources, then Persian, and only finally with the original Arabic sources.⁶

His bibliographies demonstrate that, beyond his basically standard Sunni upbringing, Liu Zhi was also willing to incorporate a wide range of Islamic concepts into his writing and worldview.

Sufi texts are both significant and abundant among Liu Zhi's lists. The infusion of Sufi thought in the *Jingtang Jiaoyu* curriculum and the *Han Kitāb* corpus was an innovation that had already taken root in Chinese Muslim scholarship in earlier generations. Four sources are cited more often by Liu Zhi than any others: (1) The *Mirṣād al-ʿibād min al-mabdā ʾilā l-māʾād* by Rāzī (d. 1256 CE); (2) *Maqṣad-i Aqṣā* by al-Nasafī (d. 1263 CE); (3) *Asbīʿat al-lamaʾāt* by Jāmī (1414–1492 CE); and (4) *Lawāʾih fī bayān maʾāni ʿirfaniyya* also by Jāmī. Liu Zhi included these four books in what he called the 'basic texts' (*benjing*, lit. 'root classics') of the *Xingli*. As such, Leslie and Wassel conclude that these 'mainly Sufi works' constitute 'the core of Liu Chih's philosophy'.⁷ All four of Liu Zhi's 'root classics' had been translated into Chinese by earlier *Han Kitāb* scholars. Liu Zhi himself translated the fourth text, the *Lawāʾih*.

In a previous generation, Wang Daiyu's metaphysical and theological formulations had shown clear signs of Sufi influence, yet he rarely cited Arabic words or mentioned the names of Muslim scholars in his writings. By contrast, Liu Zhi left us with a meticulous cataloguing of his Islamic sources. Nevertheless, there is a strong resemblance among a number of theories in the writing of the two scholars, particularly on the subject of Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*). However, due to his more systematic methods, we can more easily trace Sufi concepts and their origins in Liu Zhi's writing than in Wang Daiyu's.

Scholars have suggested that the use of Sufi sources by the *Han Kitāb* authors generally reflected an *ad hoc* approach, rather than a coherent methodology, but this view is too general to address the entire community of Chinese Muslim literati. In the early days of the Chinese Muslim educational reforms the paucity of printed books made students eager to acquire any and all available Islamic literature. However, the inclusion of Sufi texts in the curriculum was not merely the result of a

⁶ Ibid, 100.

⁷ Ibid, 85.

completely random process. There is strong evidence to suggest that the great sixteenth century reformer Hu Dengzhou and other Sinicized Muslims of the late Ming period were already under the influence of Sufi spiritual beliefs and intellectual traditions from Central Asia. Thus, the dual factors of a desire to expand the curriculum and the appeal of theoretical Sufism operated together in the evolution of Chinese Muslim scholarship, and persisted as the burgeoning scholarly network turned its attention to translating Islamic texts into Chinese.

Later, when a greater number of books became available, many Chinese Muslims still opted to read, translate and teach Sufi texts. The use of certain Sufi books had become institutionalized. Many Sufi concepts had become fully naturalized, treated as equal expressions of Islamic orthodoxy as any drawn from standard exoteric sources. Chinese Muslim scholars grouped these mystical texts together with other Islamic literature, including the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, under the common rubric *jing*, the Chinese word for 'Classics', or scriptures. Sufi books became an indispensable source of Islamic knowledge and their use was governed by conscious choice as much as, if not more than, by necessity. Liu Zhi's use of Sufism was a manifestation of his syncretism and universal outlook.

Scholars have observed that Liu Zhi's outlook and the content of his writings bear the strongest resemblance to those of Wang Daiyu, in particular in the correlations they both drew between Neo-Confucian metaphysics and Sufi formulations of Divine Unity. The writings of both men are suffused with mystical allusions to oneness, and Liu Zhi went so far as to promote the radical idea of the oneness of the Creator and creation, epitomized by the metaphysical union of God and humanity. In the *Dianli*, he followed the Sufi tradition of linking the exoteric and esoteric branches of Islam by describing the hierarchy of spiritual progress as divided into three ascending, interdependent levels: *Sharī'a* ('Law'), *Ṭarīqa* (the 'Mystic Path') and *Ḥaqīqa* ('Truth').

In his discussion of the 'Three Vehicles', a term obviously reminiscent of Buddhist discourse, Liu Zhi merged Sufi notions of human union with the Divine, with Confucian ideas of self-cultivation. According to Liu Zhi, *Sharī'a* is the 'Vehicle of Ritual...the regulation of every matter and deed...for the one who is diligent in cultivating virtue.'⁸ *Ṭarīqa* is defined as the 'Vehicle of the Path...(which) contains the universal Principle of Man and of all phenomena, as well as the completion of human potentiality in accordance with Heaven.'⁹ Consistent with the Sufi understanding of the highest level of spiritual attainment as the annihilation of ego and union with the Divine, Liu Zhi defined *Ḥaqīqa*

⁸ Liu Zhi, 'Yuanjiao Pian' in *Tianfang Dianli*, 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*

as the ‘Vehicle of Truth...(containing) the concepts of “no-self” and “no-thing”...(and the) subtle words and the symbolic language of the total integration of Man and Heaven.’¹⁰ Liu Zhi concluded this discussion of the Three Vehicles with a statement about an utterly transcendent level of realization. He wrote that

above the Three Vehicles there is the single Law of a supreme, transcendent vehicle, by which Heaven and Man may be transformed and merged. At this level names and appearances are dissolved. This state cannot be communicated by spoken or written language. Only the individual himself can fully understand it, and then only experientially.¹¹

Liu Zhi presents this ideal of an ineffable union of divinity and humanity as the ultimate goal of Islamic Ritual Law in the *Dianli*.

Liu Zhi was heavily influenced by Sufi philosophy without having any known affiliation to a Sufi order implementing practical Sufism, as we find among the Muslims of western China. A more scholastic, theoretical Sufism found its way into the *Han Kitāb* associated with the Muslim literati of eastern China. This variety of Sufism did not preclude practices such as meditation to gain insight, but theoretical Sufism was strongly associated with writing and book learning and especially concerned with abstract metaphysics relating to the notion of divine Unity, ideas largely shaped in the medieval period by the school of Ibn ‘Arabī.

A mystical sense of Absolute Unity with infinite aspects runs subtly through Liu Zhi’s theology. This Sufi influence is often oblique, and must be inferred from context, mainly because the original wording has been filtered through the language of Neo-Confucian metaphysics. Yet, from his bibliographies, we know that many of Liu Zhi’s Islamic sources were in fact Sufi texts influenced by the school of Ibn ‘Arabī, including the writings of Naqshabandi and Kubrawi scholars.

Of all Sufi theories, none was as controversial as the *waḥdat al-wujūd*, or Oneness of Being, because its monistic and pantheistic implications threatened the conventional orthodoxy that maintained the uniqueness of the Creator in utter distinction from His creation. Yet the school of Ibn ‘Arabī became among the most influential agents in the spread and popularization of Sufi thought throughout the Islamic world. Liu Zhi’s theology resounds with echoes of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *waḥdat*. For example, in the *Dianli*, he wrote:

The Original Substance of the One is unchanging and unmoving. Yet, although it becomes numerical, nothing is exhausted or deprived. Thus, as two, it becomes

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

dispersed. As three, it becomes enclosed. As hundreds and then thousands, it divides. As millions upon millions, it is further dissipated. One hundred, one thousand, or many hundreds of millions—none can escape their connection to one, and are themselves contained in that number.¹²

Liu Zhi's description of this process whereby the undifferentiated One produces infinite diversity is also reminiscent of Chinese philosophical formulations, such as the forty-second chapter of the *Daodejing*, which says: 'The Way produced to the One, the One produced the Two, the Two produced the Three, and the Three produced the Myriad Creatures.' His discourse on oneness also invokes Confucius. In an exegetical passage on sūra 112, Liu Zhi wrote: 'The meaning of the entire Classic [Qur'ān] is in this chapter, using the word 'one' to penetrate everything.'¹³ The line clearly alludes to a statement of Confucius in the *Analects* (iv:xv): 'My Way is that of an all-penetrating oneness.'

Following this pantheistic or monistic theme, Liu Zhi wrote that 'all things between Heaven and Earth are manifestations of the Lord and Master, such that there is nothing in which one cannot see Him.'¹⁴ He followed this by citing a well-known *ḥadīth*: 'One who knows himself knows the Lord.'¹⁵ Centuries earlier, Ibn 'Arabī had written a treatise in which he based his *waḥdat* claims on this saying. In a formulation reminiscent of the theories of the Ibn 'Arabī school, Liu Zhi characterized the human being as a 'microcosm of Heaven and Earth'.¹⁶ He went on to state that when the human being comes to realize that this analogy is not simply a reflection, but actually an extension, of the relationship of God to the Creation, then he or she will come to 'recognize his or her own Original Nature', a term heavy with Buddhist overtones.¹⁷ The clear implication is that the 'Original Nature' of all that exists is essentially the same as our own human nature.

It is not surprising that the *Han Kitāb* scholars were drawn to some of the more pantheistic or monistic teachings of theoretical Sufism. By the seventeenth century these ideas were diffused throughout the Islamic world, and so made their way to China in the form of texts. The choice by writers like Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi to use abstract theoretical Sufi

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Liu Zhi, 'Yuanjiao Pian' in *Tianfang Dianli*, 30.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. Cf. the saying attributed to the Prophet, 'The believer is the mirror of the Believed' (Ibn 'Arabī, 'Whoso Knoweth Himself...' from the *Treatise on Being* (*Risālat al-wujūdiyya*). Transl. by T. H. Weir (Abingdon, UK: Beshara Publications, [1976] 1988), 21.

¹⁷ Ibid.

teachings was a conscious one. These teachings, which offered an abstract conception of divinity to complement, or supplement, the standard theistic conception of exoteric Islam, suited Liu Zhi's presentation of Islam to a Chinese audience. In China, the elite Confucian tradition had resisted notions of a personal Creator for centuries. Daoism and Buddhism, due to their own inherent monistic tendencies, also shared this tendency. Therefore, Sufi theories that inclined towards monism struck a chord with Muslim scholars seeking a mode of expression through Chinese religio-philosophical traditions.

Liu Zhi's incorporation of exoteric and esoteric elements in his Chinese presentation of Islam bears resemblance to the work of jurists and theologians in the central Islamic world who infused Sufi ideas in their general discussions of Islamic beliefs and practices. Liu Zhi's work also resonates with the values and methods of Chinese scholarship. His discourse on Ritual as a means of cultivation of the self is an idea reminiscent of both Neo-Confucian *Xinxue* (the study of the heart/mind), and Sufism. Bringing together the diverse strands of Confucian and Islamic exoteric and esoteric theory, Liu Zhi created a body of work that was at once quintessentially Chinese and Muslim, reflecting the inherent, uncontrived concord of the ethno-religious simultaneity of his community.

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