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## Chinese-Language Islam

Estimates of the number of Muslims living in China today vary widely, but fifteen to twenty million seems to be the minimum. Ten Muslim nationalities are officially recognized by the government, nine of which speak their own languages and live in specific areas of China. The tenth, the so-called Hui, speak only Chinese (albeit with many words and expressions peculiar to themselves) and are scattered all over the country.<sup>1</sup>

Islam's history in China extends back to the seventh century, that is, the first century of Islam. The Chinese Muslims provide mythic accounts of how Islam came to China during the lifetime of the Prophet himself, who died in 632. It is known that China signed its first treaty with a Muslim mission in 651, the year of the final conquest of Persia, so the mythic accounts cannot be too far off. A second mission arrived in 655, and another forty are recorded as arriving by the end of the eighth century.<sup>2</sup> Opinions differ as to when immigrant Muslims may have formed some sort of community, and there is no strong evidence for a Chinese-speaking Muslim community until around the ninth century.<sup>3</sup>

No one knows to what extent the Islamic presence in China derived from immigrants or from Chinese converts. However this may be, many of the immigrants gradually became indistinguishable from the native Chinese, and a large population of Muslims who considered themselves Chinese became established. Until the seventeenth century, however, it seems that Islamic learning was transmitted in Persian and Arabic (and perhaps Turkic dialects as well), since we have no Chinese texts on Islam written by Chinese Muslims before this time.

Historians agree that Chinese Islam in general is heavily influenced by Persianate Islam. The Japanese historian Tazaka Kōdō, for example, analyzed several book lists provided by Japanese and European researchers in his monumental study of the history of Chinese Islam and came to the conclusion that the books used were mainly by Persian authors

and mostly in Persian, though Arabic works also played a significant role. After all, Persian was the primary language of Islamic instruction from Persia east, and Arabic is the language of the Koran and of the majority of the Islamic classics.

China was one of the more isolated outposts of Islam, and it was also the site of an enormously rich indigenous civilization. Thus it is not surprising that Muslims eventually had to write in Chinese in order to pass on the Islamic tradition to fellow Muslims. What is surprising is that this movement did not begin until the seventeenth century. The historical factors that precipitated the decision to write in Chinese remain to be investigated. Here I will only suggest certain preliminary conclusions that can be gleaned from the writings themselves.

## The Essentials of Islam

By the seventeenth century, Islamic literature in Arabic and Persian was enormously rich. The Islamic sciences had developed in several directions, and diverse writings were available within China itself. When the Chinese ulama decided to write in Chinese, their basic difficulties were how best to cull the essential teachings of Islam from the original sources and then express them in an appropriate idiom. To understand the nature of the problem that they faced, it is necessary to know something about the general situation of Islamic learning at this point in history.

To conceptualize their own religion, Muslims have traditionally divided Islam into complementary fields of knowledge. They considered all these to have roots in the Koran and the Sunnah (the words and acts of the Prophet), while they saw the religion itself as a flourishing tree, with clearly defined branches, each oriented toward the production of fruit. The fruit of Islam's tree is the perfection of human individuals, however this might be formulated in various schools of thought. Thus Islamic scholarship has always had its own criteria for distinguishing the essential from the accidental, the roots from the branches, and the flowers from the fruit.

In one of the basic ways of thinking about the tradition, Islam is viewed as a "religion" (*dīn*) with three fundamental dimensions. These are *islām* or submission to God's will, *īmān* or faith in God and his teachings, and *ihsān* or virtue, sincerity, and beauty of character. One might also call these right action, right understanding, and right intention.<sup>4</sup> As the tree of Islamic learning developed, each of these dimensions grew into a major branch of learning with many boughs and twigs.

The branch of learning that addressed right activity came to be known as "jurisprudence," or the science of the Shariah (the revealed law). After Koranic Arabic, this has been the most commonly studied science among

Muslims. The Shariah delineates in clear detail what the Koran and the Sunnah teach about rites and various communal and societal actions. The so-called “Five Pillars of Islam” are the most basic rites, incumbent on all Muslims. But the Shariah, like Jewish law and Confucian social teachings, also deals with many issues that do not appear “religious”—and certainly not “spiritual”—to most people in the modern West. These include foods, business transactions, marriage, and inheritance. The Orientalist adage, “Islam is not a religion but a way of life,” refers in part to this wide reach of the Shariah.

The second basic branch of Islamic learning addresses right understanding. The Koran commands faith in God, his angels, the scriptures, the prophets, and the Last Day, and it was clear to Muslims that people cannot have faith in things of which they have no knowledge. From earliest times, scholars devoted themselves to explicating these objects of faith. By the third/ninth century, this second branch of the tradition had subdivided into three major offshoots, each of which was well on its way to full flower. “Kalam” or dogmatic theology took a defensive and polemical view of Koranic teachings, depending on rational argument to convince doubters and disbelievers. “Philosophy” was heavily indebted to the Greek heritage and, like Kalam, took a rational approach to understanding, but it avoided Koranic language and often voiced opinions on Ultimate Reality and the prophets that blatantly contradicted the views of the Kalam authorities. “Theoretical Sufism” differed from the first two by stressing suprarational perception over reason. For the Sufi authorities, the key to understanding was not the acquisition of knowledge through study and investigation, but—much in the Taoist fashion—the emptying of the heart so that God might inspire it directly. The most common designation for the knowledge gained by this route is “unveiling” (*kashf*). Although these branches of learning tended to be distinct in their formative period, many scholars studied all of them and a number of famous authors wrote books in more than one branch or harmonized them in various ways.

The third basic branch of Islamic learning has to do with right intention, sincerity, purity of character, love for God and the neighbor, ethics, morality, interiority, and the spiritual path. This is the whole enterprise of strengthening one’s personal connection with the divine, purifying the heart and mind, and attempting to live day-by-day in the awareness of God’s presence. The most thorough explications of these issues are found in theoretical Sufism which, as noted, pertains to the domain of right understanding.

In all these branches of Islam, it was—and remains—difficult to speak of anything that might properly be called “orthodoxy,” given that there has been no institution that might decree the correctness or incorrectness of various expressions. This is not to say that no one made claims to

authority, simply that there was no church or hierarchy that could adjudicate the claims. As a result, Islamic norms became established through various sorts of consensus, but debates have always continued. Certainly Muslims agree on the basic principles, which are God's unity, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the divine origin of the Koran. But all these are terms that need definition, and diversity of opinion arises as soon as definitions are formulated. Some observers have suggested that "orthopraxy" was the criterion for Islamicity—that is, acknowledgment of the incumbency of the Shariah and observance of it. This is perhaps closer to the actual historical situation, but it also is problematic. It is true, however, that acceptance of the incumbency of the "Five Pillars" has been considered by most Muslim scholars as the least criterion for Islamic affiliation.

In the second branch of learning, which is the domain of right understanding, there are three foundational issues, often called the "three principles" of Islam—the assertion that God is one (*tawhīd*), prophecy, and the Return to God. Each of the three branches of the tradition that dealt with right understanding discussed these issues in its own ways. Philosophy, for example, had several major schools, and the basic discussions were all rooted in the three principles. In the seventeenth century, most of the positions of the three major approaches to this field of learning were still being discussed. For example, Mullā Ṣadrā of Shiraz (d. 1640) presents in his *Asfār* an encyclopedic engagement with all the philosophical and theological positions of earlier schools of thought. Theoretical Sufism was especially rich in the diversity of its approaches to divine Unity, though by the seventeenth century the dominant themes were set by the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240).<sup>5</sup>

Sufism had several characteristics that made it adaptable to diverse cultural contexts. These help explain why Sufi teachers were commonly the means whereby Islam has expanded its borders, as can be witnessed in India, Indonesia, Central Asia, Africa, and, as scholars have often remarked, China. These characteristics can be boiled down to the fact that Sufism stresses the essential over the accidental. Always the Sufi teachers focus on "spirituality," which is to say that they stress the kernel over the shell, the meaning over the letter, the spirit over the body, and the subtle over the dense. If, for example, Rūmī's 25,000-verse didactic poem, the *Mathnawī*, has been called for centuries "the Koran in the Persian language," this is not to suggest that it has any formal similarity with the Koran. Rather, the *Mathnawī* succeeds in bringing out what Rūmī himself calls "the roots of the roots of the roots of the religion." It is this special ability to look beyond the form and into the divine intention that marks Sufi writings throughout Islamic history.

Traditional criticisms of the Sufis have come from two groups of scholars who have a vested interest in defending the formal dimensions of

the religion. These are the jurists, who specialize in the Shariah, and the Kalam authorities, who defend the primacy of certain exteriorizing interpretations of the Koran. The Sufis have typically replied by agreeing upon the necessity of the formal observances as well as belief in the Koranic dogmas, but by criticizing the critics for not recognizing that all these things, no matter how necessary for Islamic faith and practice, are the body of Islam. Real Islam demands making contact with the heart and spirit of Islam.

## The Chinese Language

It is worth remembering that the Chinese ulama were faced with a problem that was not present in any of the other languages used to express Islamic teachings. It would be next to impossible to write scholarly Chinese in the Arabic script, and only slightly less difficult to write Arabic in the Chinese script. When a language does employ the Arabic script, any Arabic word can be made part of it, so languages like Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Sindhi, Gujrati, and Malaysian have numerous Arabic loan-words, and indeed, a language deserves to be called an "Islamic" language largely because of the massive carryover of Arabic terminology. Even the European languages allow for a relatively simple transliteration of Arabic words. But the Chinese script simply does not permit transliteration except in an enormously awkward and even grotesque manner.<sup>6</sup> Thus the name Muhammad, which obviously had to be spelled out in Chinese at least on occasion, ended up being written in a half-dozen different ways, each of them a cumbersome attempt to present the word phonetically.

In short, it should not be surprising that the Chinese Muslim authors avoided using Arabic words. But this made their task unique in the Islamic world. Everywhere else, authors could simply employ the Arabic terms in their own languages, without having to worry too much about getting the exact meaning across. The Chinese ulama had to use pre-existing Chinese words to render Islamic ideas, and every one of these words had precedents and connotations in one or more of the three Chinese traditions—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The paucity of references in the Chinese works to the great personalities of Islamic history, unparalleled in Islamic literature, is tied directly to the difficulty of representing their names in Chinese characters.

There are numerous important terms known in the Islamic languages for which the Chinese authors had to find equivalents. What should be done, for example, with the word *Allah*? In Persian, the word is part of everyday speech, though people are just as likely to use the Persian equivalent (*khudā*). But there is no equivalent in Chinese. According to

Tazaka, to render the concept of God Muslims used "heaven" in the Tang period (618–907) and both "heaven" and "Buddha" in the Sung dynasty (960–1279). At the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when they had begun writing books in Chinese, they used words like "Real Lord" (*chen-chu*), "Real One" (*chen-i*), "Real Ruler" (*chen-tsaï*), and "Lord" (*chu*).

"Real Lord" is especially interesting because Christians employed the expression "Heavenly Lord" (*t'ien-chu*). The very name of the Christian divinity would have caused difficulties for metaphysically minded Chinese, given that heaven and earth are inseparably linked, while the supreme principle must lie beyond the two. As it happens, the Koran frequently refers to God as "creator of heaven and earth," and the common Chinese expression "heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things" has its Koranic equivalent in "heaven, earth, and what is between the two," which occurs in some twenty verses.

The question of Islamic terminology in Chinese has yet to be investigated with any rigor, so a few examples will have to suffice. Muhammad was referred to as the "Sage" (*sheng*) or the "Utmost Sage" (*chih-sheng*)—"sage" being a term that was reserved for Confucius and the great teachers who had preceded him. Muhammad was also called the "Chief Servant" (*shou-p'u*) and the "Ambassador" (*ch'in-ch'a*), terms that reflect a standard version of the second half of the Shahadah (the testimony of faith), recited in the daily prayer—"I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and His messenger." The Koran is the "classic" (*ching*), the "heavenly classic" (*t'ien-ching*), and the "real classic of the true mandate" (*shih-ming chen-ching*). The Islamic tradition itself is often called "the pure and real teaching" (*ch'ing-chen chiao*). Adam is the "human ancestor" (*jen-tsu*). The prophets (*anbiyā'*) and "friends" of God (or the "saints," *awliyā'*) are the "sages and worthies" (*sheng-hsien*). The angels are the "heavenly immortals" (*t'ien-hsien*), a term associated with Taoism. The jinn, who in Islamic terms are spiritual beings ranked below the angels and made of fire rather than light, are "spirits and demons" (*shen-kuei*). Satan is the "chief spirit" (*shou-shen*) or the "chief devil" (*shou-mo*). The vicegerent of God (Arabic *khalīfa*; English caliph), a term whose spiritual rather than political meaning is important in Chinese, is the "representative" (*tai-li*). Paradise is called "heaven country" (*t'ien-kuo*) or "ultimate happiness" (*chi-lo*). Hell is called "earth prohibited" (*ti-chin*) or "earth prison" (*ti-yü*). The daily prayer (Arabic *ṣalāt*, Persian *namāz*) is called "worship" (*li-pai*). The mosque (*masjid*) is named "the temple of worship" (*li-pai ssu*) or "the temple of the pure and real" (*ch'ing-chen ssu*). In all these cases, the Arabic expressions are basic Koranic terms, but the Chinese words are unrecognizable as Islamic terminology except in the context of the Islamic writings.

The Islamic languages also have numerous theological and philosophical terms that are necessary for serious discussion of the religion, and



translating these called for a good knowledge not only of Islamic thought but also of the Chinese intellectual tradition. The first principle of faith, *tawhīd*, is often rendered as “returning to one” (*kuei-i*) or “practicing one” (*hsi-i*). God is frequently discussed in Islamic texts in terms of “essence and attributes” (*dhāt wa ṣifāt*), and for this pairing the Chinese ulama used standard Neo-Confucian pairings such as “root nature” (*pen-jan*) and “movement and quietude” (*tung-ching*), or “substance” (*t’i*) and “function” (*yung*). One of the goals of seeking knowledge is to discover the “reality” (*ḥaqīqa*) of things, and this term is often rendered by the extremely important Neo-Confucian term “principle” (*li*). The two basic worlds of the cosmos, often called the “world of the witnessed” (*‘ālam al-shahāda*) and the “world of the absent” (*‘ālam al-ghayb*), become the “world of color” (*yu-se chiaï*) and the “colorless world” (*wu-se chiaï*)—terms that in the context of Buddhism have usually been translated into English as the “world of forms” and the “formless world.”<sup>7</sup>

## Wang Tai-yü

In *Islam in Traditional China*, Donald Leslie writes that the first Chinese book on Islam known to have been written by a Muslim is *The Real Commentary on the True Teaching* (*Cheng-chiao chen-ch’üan*) by Wang Tai-yü.<sup>8</sup> Other historians agree that the *The Real Commentary* is one of the most basic works in the history of Chinese Islam, and that its author is one of the two most important leaders of Chinese-language Islam.<sup>9</sup>

Little is known of Wang Tai-yü’s life. The modern editor of his works can come no closer to a date of birth than 1573–1619. Nonetheless, circa 1590 seems likely. At the end of an autobiographical note in *The Real Commentary*, Wang signs his name as *chen-hui lao-jen* (an old man of the real Hui). This suggests that at the time of finishing the book he was at least forty. Most likely he was about fifty, which was Confucius’ age when he came to know the heavenly mandate. Liang I-chün, a disciple of Wang Tai-yü, wrote an introduction to *The Real Commentary* and put its date at 1642.<sup>10</sup> Thus we can assume that Wang was born about 1592, or at most ten years later. The fact that he did not start studying classical Chinese seriously until he was thirty makes the earlier date much more likely than the later.

It is worth noting here that Wang is often referred to in the later literature as “the old man of the real Hui,” and in his conversations and dialogues compiled by his disciples he is also referred to by this title. The disciples, if not Wang himself, certainly had in view the corresponding Arabic and Persian terms for “old man,” that is *shaykh* and *pīr*, both of which were employed to mean teacher and especially Sufi master. Rūmī reminds us that “The shaykh is the ‘old man’ through the intellect, not

through whiteness of beard and head,"<sup>11</sup> so one might think that Wang's own use of the term "old man" does not refer to age. However, it is unlikely that a young man would call himself by this term in the Chinese context, or even in the traditional Islamic context.

The best guess at the year of Wang's death seems to be 1657–58. His disciple Ho Han-ching wrote an introduction to what appears to be a second edition of *The Real Commentary*, dating it 1657; in it he refers to Wang as still alive.<sup>12</sup> In the introduction to another of Wang's work, Ma Chung-hsin, one of his most famous disciples, refers to his teacher as "the late master Wang," and this is dated 1658.<sup>13</sup>

In introducing *The Real Commentary*, Wang tells us that his ancestor was an astronomer who had come to China from "Arabia" (*t'ien-fang*, more likely Persia) to bring a tribute to the emperor Kao three hundred years earlier, during the Ming Hung-wu era (1368–98). He then undertook to correct the details of the emperor's astronomy and to fix the mistakes of the calendars. "He surveyed high into the nine heavens and deep into the nine seas and stood aloof from previous works, without any mistakes." The emperor was pleased and thought that it was not possible to reach what he had reached if there was no true transmission of a true learning. Finally he bestowed upon him a Directorate of Astronomy, granted him a house, and exempted him from various obligations. "For three hundred years this mature learning has survived."<sup>14</sup>

Wang underwent the traditional training of a Muslim scholar in the Islamic languages. He is not specific, but he must have known both Persian and Arabic, if not a Turkic language as well. Sciences that he studied—because any Muslim scholar must study them—include Arabic grammar, Koran commentary, Hadith (sayings of the Prophet), jurisprudence, practical morality, and theology. He certainly also studied theoretical Sufism and perhaps Islamic philosophy.

Although Wang had immersed himself in Islamic learning, as a young man he did not have the ability to write proper Chinese—this despite the fact that he belonged to a Muslim family that had been established in China for three hundred years. He presumably had relatives who had become thoroughly Sinicized. This alone would have sensitized him to the difficulties of making Islamic teachings available to Muslims who were learned in Chinese but had no proper training in the Islamic languages. Moreover, his own social position did not allow him to be proud that he did not know Chinese—which might have been the case if his family had lived in some isolated part of China. He writes that he did not study Confucian learning in his childhood, and at the age of twenty his knowledge of Chinese was sufficient only for correspondence. At the age of thirty, he says, "I was so ashamed of my stupidity and smallness that I started to read [Chinese] books on metaphysics and history."<sup>15</sup> Given his role as a scholar serving the Muslim community, it is doubtful



that he was ashamed before the non-Muslim Chinese. Most likely he means that he was not able to communicate properly with well-educated Muslims—that is, those who had gone through the standard Chinese educational system. One of his accomplishments seems precisely to be that he eventually mastered the intellectual arts of his time and was able to engage in discussions and debates with other Chinese scholars on their own level. When his student Liang writes in his introduction to *The Real Commentary*, “My teacher Wang Tai-yü had mastered the four teachings and had studied all the doctrines of the various schools,”<sup>16</sup> this does not seem to be too much of an exaggeration.

Chin Chi-t'ang, the first modern scholar to take a critical look at the Chinese sources on Islam, wrote a short biography of Wang that is reprinted in the 1987 edition of Wang's collected works. He tells us that Wang originally lived and taught in Nanjing.<sup>17</sup> When the soldiers of the newly established Ch'ing dynasty invaded the city in the year 1645, he went to Beijing. There he met a wealthy Muslim merchant named Ma Ssu-yüan, who offered him hospitality as a guest teacher. Ma was in the habit of holding sessions in which scholars of various traditions would gather and debate, and Wang soon became known as one of the most outstanding of these scholars. According to one anecdote, in 1650 the abbot of the Iron Mountain Buddhist monastery heard of Wang's prowess in debate and undertook to challenge him. He spent days debating Wang, but eventually had to admit the inferiority of his own understanding, and then he became Wang's disciple.<sup>18</sup> When Wang died, he was buried in the graveyard of his benefactor's family. In the year 1935, Wang's tomb was renewed and a new stele was erected.<sup>19</sup>

Three of Wang's works record his debates and conversations, which were gathered together by his disciples after his death. The longest of these works is called *The True Answers of the Very Real* (*Hsi-chen cheng-ta*). Published in 1658 by his disciple Wu Lien-ch'eng, it is a collection of some two hundred exchanges in the form of questions and answers. Some take the form of short or longer dialogues, and some are simply a single question along with Wang's answer. The questioners were Muslims, both scholars and commoners, as well as Taoists, Buddhists, and Confucians.

The other two collections of dialogues are presented as the *Appendix* (*fu-lu*) and the *Addendum* (*sheng-yü*) to *The True Answers*. The first of these, about three thousand characters long, adds thirty-six conversations in the same style as the main text, dealing mainly with Confucianism and Islam. The *Addendum* is a series of short questions from Buddhist monks with equally short answers in about four thousand characters. The latter text represents Wang as a skillful practitioner of Zen-style repartee, but it also presents him as sharply critical of Buddhist positions. Tazaka questions its authenticity, suggesting that it may have been written later

and appended to the book as a way of making Wang appear more hostile to Buddhism than he actually was.

*The Real Commentary* is by far Wang's longest work. In it, he summarizes Islamic teachings in two volumes, each of which is divided into twenty chapters. The relatively scant attention that the work pays to Islamic practices suggests that Wang Tai-yü was not worried about the transmission of the Shariah. Presumably Muslims were being taught how to pray, fast, and prepare food in the proper way within the family. Instead, Wang is attempting to explain the logic of Islamic theological, cosmological, and psychological teachings, many of which might not have made sense to the Chinese mind, especially if offered without attention to the subtleties of Chinese thought. In cases where Wang does discuss practice, the issues are usually those that would go against Chinese customs, such as the prohibition of pork, wine, and gambling. Indeed, for the Chinese, the most striking characteristic of the followers of this foreign religion was precisely the fact that they refused to eat pork, that greatest of delicacies.

Wang depicts Islam in a way that makes it appear largely in agreement with Confucian ideas. He often quotes from the Chinese classics and sometimes employs Buddhist terminology to make his points. He is not uncritical of the three Chinese traditions, but it is probably fair to say that his criticisms do not transgress the degree of mutual criticism found among the three traditions themselves. The non-Muslim Chinese reader would not feel that Islam has too much to say that is very different from what was already available in Chinese learning. He would feel, however, that the Muslims are much more in agreement with the Confucians than with the Taoists and Buddhists.

This is not to suggest that all Muslim readers would have been happy with the way in which Wang was presenting Islam. In his introduction he remarks that certain scholars had read his manuscript and blamed him for quoting too much from the Chinese classics and going too deeply into Taoism and Buddhism. He agrees with his critics that everything can be found in the classical books of Islam, but he points out that Chinese speakers have no access to those books. Hence he has presented Islam in a way that those unfamiliar with its teachings can understand it.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere he maintains that he cites Confucian sources only in those places where Islamic teachings are no different from those of Confucianism, such as in the cultivation of the personal life, regulating the family, and governing the country. Always, however, the foundation of the argument and the standard of judgment is the Koran.<sup>21</sup>

In his introduction to *The Real Commentary*, Wang's disciple Liang explains his own view of Confucianism, and this coincides more or less with what one can glean from the writings of Wang himself. It also coincides nicely with Erik Zürcher's points about the Chinese "cultural imperative,"

noted here in the introduction. Liang writes that if someone asks if the Tao of Confucianism is wrong, he will answer that it is not. On the level of everything under heaven, the Confucian way explicates the Five Relationships—ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and two friends. It also explains sincerity of will, correctness of heart, cultivation of the personal life, regulating the family, governing the country, and bringing peace to everything under heaven. It clarifies the principles of these relationships, and it exhausts the ways, such that nothing escapes from it. It is the totally correct middle way, and it avoids all extremes. Without these teachings, the way of heaven would not be perfect and the law of governing would not be complete, and because of them, the way of the Confucian teachers never changes. However, the teachers never speak of the origin of the world and the relationship between life and death. They talk about the middle, but not about the beginning and the end.<sup>22</sup>

In short, Liang tells us that the Confucian teachings fail to address the issue of creation on the one hand and eschatology on the other. Given that *ma'ād* or the "return" to God is the third of the three principles of Islamic faith, this cannot but appear as a major lack in Muslim eyes. Moreover, discussion of the Return is invariably associated with discussion of the Origin (*mabda'*). The Koran links the notion of returning to God with that of coming from him in numerous verses, and this sets the pattern for all subsequent discussions of Islam's third principle. Thus it seems that Chinese Muslims like Wang and Liang granted the correctness of traditional Confucian teachings on social relationships and cultivation of the personal life and the self, but they considered them lacking on the level of faith, where all three principles of the religion need to be addressed—*tawhīd*, prophecy, and the return to God.

Practically nothing is known about Wang's training, but it is obvious from his writings that he was well grounded in theoretical Sufism. The research of Joseph Fletcher and others has shown that certain Sufi orders, especially the Naqshbandiyya, were active in China during this period, and there is no reason to suppose that the sophisticated theoretical doctrines of Sufism had not been brought along with the more practically oriented teachings.<sup>23</sup> The most obvious candidate for intellectual influence on Wang was the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī, which was flourishing throughout the Islamic world at this time and had several major representatives among the Naqshbandī masters. However, Wang almost never cites Arabic words or mentions names of Muslim scholars in his writings. At the present state of knowledge, it would be difficult to make anything more than circumstantial arguments for such influence.

Besides *The Real Commentary*, Wang wrote two longish treatises and several minor works. I referred to one of these treatises, *The Great Learning of the Pure and Real* (*Ch'ing-chen ta-hsüeh*), in the introduction. This work,

whose title might also be translated as “The Principles of Islam,” shows clearly the traces of Sufi theoretical teachings. As noted, the phrase “Great Learning” looks back to the Confucian classic by the same name. The expression “the Pure and Real” is a standard term by which Chinese Muslims refer to Islam—an expression that may have been coined by Wang himself.<sup>24</sup> The topic of the book is the first principle of Islam—*tawhīd* or the assertion of God’s unity—and the discussion is carried out in terms that are reminiscent of the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī, though Neo-Confucian thinking is far more obviously represented. We can conclude from this treatise that Wang found Neo-Confucian metaphysics sufficient to provide the basis for explicating the idea of *tawhīd* along with the demands that it makes for cultivation of self and individual transformation. However, he does not deal with the second and third principles of faith, those of prophecy and the Return. For his teachings on these issues, one needs to refer to *The Real Commentary*.

## Liu Chih

If anyone surpasses Wang Tai-yü in his influence on Chinese-language Islam, this would be Liu Chih, who was born about 1670, some dozen years after Wang’s death.<sup>25</sup> He wrote the culminating work of his career in 1724; it is not known when he died. He tells us that his father was a scholar who deeply felt the lack of Islamic materials in Chinese. After a preliminary Islamic education, Liu began to study the Chinese classics at the age of fifteen, then devoted six years to Arabic and Islamic literature, three to Buddhism, and one to Taoism. He completed his education by studying 137 books from the “West.” Most scholars have assumed that he means European books, and this is likely, given the fact that the famous Jesuit Matteo Ricci had arrived in China a century earlier, in 1601. He and his successors wrote many Chinese tracts on Christianity and Western knowledge in general. One Japanese scholar, however, thinks that this might mean Persian and Arabic books along with European books.<sup>26</sup>

Liu Chih turned his efforts toward making Islamic learning available in Chinese from the age of thirty-three, that is, around the year 1700. He says that he wrote several hundred manuscripts, of which he published only ten percent. Modern scholars have remarked that he is more sympathetic toward Confucianism than any other Chinese Muslim author. Like Wang, he saw no fundamental discrepancy between Islamic teachings on God and the world and the grand philosophical themes of Neo-Confucianism. Using the Neo-Confucian term *li*, he writes that the guiding “principle” of the Koran is similar to what motivated Confucius and

Mencius. This *li*, he says, "is the same *li* which exists everywhere under Heaven."<sup>27</sup> He seems to be expressing in Chinese terms the Koranic view that God has sent prophets to teach *tawhīd* to all peoples.

Liu completed his first major work in 1704, calling it *T'ien-fang hsing-li*, a title that has usually been translated as *The Philosophy of Arabia*. *T'ien-fang* means literally "the direction of heaven," and is used both for Mecca, the direction of Muslim prayer, and for Arabia. *Hsing-li* means literally "nature and principle," but it refers specifically to Neo-Confucianism, which is typically called "the school of nature and principle" (*hsing-li hsüeh*). Thus, it would not be going too far to translate *T'ien-fang hsing-li* as "Islamic Neo-Confucianism." Like the title of Wang's *Great Learning of the Pure and the Real*, it points already to a synthesis of Islamic and Confucian teachings.

The *Philosophy of Arabia* is divided into six short books. The first book, which Liu Chih calls *pen-ching*, "the root classic," sets down the main ideas of the text in five chapters, for a total of about 2,000 characters. The five chapters are followed by ten diagrams that illustrate the metaphysical and cosmological relationships described in the chapters. Each of the five remaining books explains one of the five chapters in detail, and each employs twelve more diagrams to do so. The resulting seventy diagrams are reminiscent of those found in Arabic and Persian works of the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī from about the eighth/fourteenth century onward, but they also appear to be traditional Chinese depictions of the relationships among the three basic realities—heaven, earth, and the human being. This may be why a non-Muslim mandarin and Vice-Minister of the Board of Propriety could remark in a preface to the *Philosophy* that the Buddhists and Taoists had undermined the ancient Confucian doctrines. "Now, however, in this book of Liu Chih we can see once more the Way of the ancient sages. . . . Thus, although his book explains Islam, in truth it illuminates our Confucianism."<sup>28</sup>

If we do keep the translation *Philosophy of Arabia* for Liu Chih's *T'ien-fang hsing-li*, it needs to be kept in mind that the study of "Nature and the Principle" that he undertakes does not coincide with *falsafa* in the technical Islamic sense. His Neo-Confucian approach to things is much more congenial with the world view of later Sufism than with that of the Muslim philosophers. The fact that he had an eye on Sufi texts becomes completely clear in the first book, the "root classic," where he repeatedly mentions a number of Persian and Arabic works by name. These include Najm al-Dīn Rāzī's *Miršād al-ibād* (twenty-nine times), ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī's *Ashīʿat al-lamaʿāt* (fifteen times), ʿAzīz al-Dīn Nasafī's *Maqṣad-i aqṣā* (twelve times), and Jāmī's *Lawāʾih* (eleven times).<sup>29</sup> These are four classic Sufi texts, the first three of which had been translated into Chinese some thirty or forty years earlier, and the last of which

was later translated by Liu Chih himself. I will have more to say about them shortly.

Liu Chih completed his second major work, [*A Selection of the Important*] *Rules and Proprieties of Arabia* (T'ien-fang tien-li [tse yao-chieh]), in 1710; it deals in twenty sections with a variety of theoretical and practical teachings. He finished his third and last major work, a biography of Muhammad, in Nanjing in 1137/1724. This is the only long Chinese work on Islam to have been studied by modern scholars; it was partly translated into English in 1921, and also into Russian, French, and Japanese.<sup>30</sup> The article on Liu Chih in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* calls it "undoubtedly Liu Chih's greatest work," but this seems a premature judgment, since greatness is not necessarily gauged by widespread appeal. The work is a relatively straightforward recounting of the historico-mythic origins of Islam in terms that agree with traditional Arabic and Persian texts and fit the rhetorical and religious needs of Chinese Muslims. Certainly a study of Liu Chih's methods in this book would tell us a great deal about how Islam was being taught to Chinese Muslims. But Liu Chih's two other major books, especially the *Philosophy*, are sophisticated attempts to harmonize Islamic metaphysical, cosmological, and spiritual teachings with the Chinese traditions. They are certainly more interesting for Chinese intellectual history, and either or both may have made a more important contribution to the permanent establishment of Islam in China.<sup>31</sup>

In both *Philosophy* and *Rules and Proprieties*, Liu Chih provides lists of the titles that he employed as his sources. There are altogether sixty-eight different titles, eighteen of which are used in both books. At least fifteen titles represent various Sufi schools of thought.<sup>32</sup> Although the exact identity of many of the titles has not yet been established, there do not seem to be any significant works pertaining to the fields of Kalam and Islamic philosophy. In other words, most of the works that provide theoretical explanations of the nature of things—God, the cosmos, the soul—belong to the Sufi tradition. It is clearly the Sufi works along with Neo-Confucianism that form the basis for Liu Chih's explanation of Islamic teachings.

Even more indicative of the Sufi context of Liu Chih's *Philosophy* is the actual text, which is a synthesis of the metaphysical and cosmological teachings of the just-mentioned Persian works presented in the language of Neo-Confucianism. The book seems to have been widely read well into the twentieth century, because it was republished twenty-five times between 1760 and 1939.<sup>33</sup> A brief summary of the contents of its first book can help provide a sense of the theoretical issues that occupied the minds of Muslim intellectuals.

Chapter one: The beginning of creation and transformation. The beginningless beginning is the origin of the ten thousand things. This is



the Real Substance, which is the root nature of creation and transformation. It is the Real Being, the Uniquely One, and the Real Principle. Its knowledge and power pervade its root nature, and these two become manifest as the inward and outward of the subtle function. As the subtle function starts to move, yin and yang become separate, bringing about the manifestation of water and fire. Fire appears outwardly along with air, and then heaven and the stars become manifest. Water piles up inwardly along with earth, and then the earth and the oceans come into existence. Next the four elements bring forth the ten thousand things.

Chapter two: The separate endeavors of the ten thousand beings. The One Real overflows and transforms, and this results in the appearance of principle along with images. The principle is possessed by the Real's knowledge, and the images are seen because of its power. Knowledge pertains to the domain of before-heaven (the spiritual realm), and power spreads out in after-heaven (the earthly realm). The domain of before-heaven reveals itself through images, and the domain of after-heaven gives form to the principle. Knowledge and power become manifest in a great variety of human types, including four degrees of sagehood and various lesser degrees such as those of worthies, men of knowledge, modest servants, and good people. So also they appear in the various levels of creatures, including the three "children" (Chinese *tzu*, Arabic *muwalladāt*), which are the animals, plants, and inanimate things, and in the nine heavens, the four elements, and the four seasons.

Chapter three: How human nature and the human body come to be manifest. The essence of the seven elements (the four elements and the three children) turns outwardly and gives birth to the human ancestor. All the qualities and characteristics of the created things appear in human beings gradually, beginning month by month in the womb and extending to the stages of their gradual growth and development until they reach perfection.

Chapter four: The virtues preserved in the human body, heart, nature, and mandate. All virtues are gathered together in the heart. Seven virtues make the heart spiritual and clear. These are obedience, faithfulness, kindness, clear discernment, sincere reality, issuing concealment, and real appearance. The last of these is the first heart, or the real human heart that gave birth to all the levels of the descending arc of manifestation. The human task is to traverse the ascending arc. Thereby one can return to the real heart, complete the circle, and achieve the perfect form of human fullness, the state of the human ultimate.

Chapter five: How everything described in the first four chapters returns to the One. One is the root nature of all numbers, and the numbers are the subtle functions of the One. When substance (*t'i*) and function (*yung*) are undivided, this is the "Real One." When function manifests substance, this is the "Numerical One." When the function returns to

the substance, this is the "Embodied One." Although there are three Ones, in fact each is the same One with a different description. The Real One gives rise to transformation, the Numerical One perfects transformation, and the Embodied One transforms the transformations. Each of the three Ones has in turn three levels, each of which has a variety of manifestations on the level of cosmic transformation, though all manifest the same Principle. The tiniest thing manifests the complete substance of the root nature, and each moment is everlasting and infinite. Heaven and the human being are undivided transformations, and all things and the "I" go back to the Real. The first act is the principle of reality, the present act is the guise of reality, and the seeing of the guise is the being of the reality. At this point the seed and the fruit are completed.

It should be noted here that Liu Chih's discussion of the "three Ones" in the fifth chapter has in view Wang Tai-yü's discussion of the same three Ones in the *Great Learning*, though the subdivisions of each One do not follow Wang's scheme.

## The Arabic Translation of Liu Chih's *Philosophy*

Liu Chih's *Philosophy of Arabia* was highly esteemed by the Chinese ulama, so much so that one of them translated it into Arabic. This was Ma Lian-yüan, who was born around 1840 and died in 1903. He was a member of a famous scholarly family from Yunnan and played an active role in encouraging Islamic education in that province. He is said to have written about twenty books, mostly in Arabic and Persian. He published his translation of Liu's *Philosophy* in two stages. In 1898, he published the Chinese text of the root classic, along with an interlinear Arabic translation. This appeared in Yunnan with the Chinese title *Hsing-li wei-yen* ("The concealed words of the *Philosophy*") and the Arabic title *Laṭā'if* ("Subtleties").<sup>34</sup>

Given that the text of *Laṭā'if* is extremely dense, Ma no doubt had planned to provide a commentary on it from the beginning. However, it seems that he left China around the time that the book appeared, going first to Burma and ending up in Cawnpore in India. There he published his commentary (a book of 165 pages) during the last year of his life. He called it *Sharḥ-i laṭā'if* ("The explanation of the 'subtleties'"). It seems to have had quite a readership, because it was republished in Cawnpore some twenty years later, and then published for a third time in Shanghai. In the text, Ma calls himself by his Arabic name Muḥammad Nūr al-Ḥaqq ibn al-Sayyid Luqmān.<sup>35</sup> He makes a good deal of use of Liu Chih's five books of commentary on the five chapters, but his explanation of

the text is far too free to be called anything but a paraphrase of Liu Chih's own commentary.

Ma's *Laṭā'if* and *Sharḥ-i laṭā'if* present Liu Chih's teachings in Arabic terms that would be familiar to anyone versed in theoretical Sufism. At first glance, they seem to be more or less standard Sufi explanations of the nature of God's relationship with the cosmos and the soul. There is no overt trace of the Neo-Confucian world view that is so obvious in Liu Chih's original. However, careful study shows that the text depicts the Islamic universe in a way that is clearly reminiscent of Chinese thought. A unifying theme of the book is the balance that is established between two complementary divine attributes—knowledge and power—whose mutual activity brings the universe into existence. The original Chinese text demonstrates explicitly that Liu Chih had in mind the yin-yang complementarity that guides Chinese depictions of the nature of the universe.

In Ma's *Laṭā'if*, the first chapter is called "Explaining the descents of the macrocosm." In it he describes twelve descending levels of reality. The second chapter details all the kinds of existent things in the macrocosm, explaining how their diverse characteristics depend on the divine attributes that they manifest. Chapter three explains that the human being was created in twelve levels that coincide with the twelve levels of the macrocosm. Chapter four deals with the specific characteristics of human beings, especially the virtues and character traits that distinguish them from other creatures, and it also describes the various human types. The fifth and final chapter explains how human beings bring together all the characteristics and qualities of the universe and then, by means of their own all-comprehensive nature, return to the One from which the universe arose.

The manner in which Ma's Arabic text is infused with yin-yang thinking can be seen by any careful reader. Here it will suffice to analyze the argument of the first chapter, in which the pattern is set for the rest of the book. The chapter begins by dividing reality into three basic stages, which are God, heaven, and earth; or True Existence, the spiritual realm, and the corporeal realm. Each of these stages can be further subdivided. The first stage can be divided into three levels, which are God's Essence, his attributes, and his acts—though Ma also mentions many other well-known names for these levels. The second stage, also in three levels, pertains to the spiritual world. It includes the supreme Spirit (the First Intellect), the universal soul, and the universal intellect. As for the third stage, it covers the six levels of the corporeal world, beginning with the Dust (universal substance), moving down through the four elements, heaven and earth, and the three progeny (the three kingdoms); and ending with human beings.

The Chinese influence on this scheme begins to appear right at the beginning when the text explains how the divine attributes give rise to the divine acts. What is unusual is the focus on two divine attributes to the exclusion of others, these two being knowledge and power, or omniscience and omnipotence. The two join together to issue the creative "command" (*amr*), which is "Be" (*kun*), and this in turn gives rise to the first "being" (*kawn*), which is none other than the Spirit (the First Intellect).

The Spirit is a single created reality that displays the traces of knowledge and power. The dual aspect of its divine source appears in the two remaining levels of the spiritual world. The trace of knowledge gives rise to the universal soul, which is the spiritual reality of all possessors of spirits, meaning animals, humans, jinn, and angels. The trace of power gives rise to the universal intellect, which is the spiritual reality governing inanimate things, meaning celestial spheres, elements, minerals, and plants. In short, the cooperation of knowledge and power brings about two sorts of spiritual reality, one centered on awareness and the other on activity. Thus, the universal soul and the universal intellect are the yin and yang of the spiritual realm. A slight Taoist influence might be discerned here in the fact that yin, represented by knowledge and soul, stands higher on the scale of reality than yang, represented by power and intellect, though the standard Sufi schemes also place knowledge higher than power.

The text calls the first level of the corporeal world, which is the Dust (*habā*) or universal substance, the "dregs" of soul and intellect. Since soul and intellect arise from the traces of knowledge and power, the dregs manifest these same two divine attributes. Within the Dust, the traces of these two attributes are differentiated into two forces, which the Chinese text calls yin and yang. In place of these two words, Ma introduces two rather strange Arabic words, *qarrānī* and *ḥarrānī*, which may be his own coinage. The meanings of the two terms are clear both from their derivation and from Ma's explanation of the text. They can be translated respectively as "frigid" and "fervid."

Ma explains that the divine power, which becomes manifest in the spiritual domain as intellect, demands the movement of creative activity, and this movement produces heat. In contrast, the divine knowledge, which becomes manifest in the spiritual domain as soul, demands stillness, or the fixity of the objects of knowledge within the knowing subject, and this stillness gives rise to cold. Thus, within the original, undifferentiated and chaotic Dust, some of the dust is fervid or yang and some frigid or yin; some is moving and some still. The fervid dust moves toward the outside, and the frigid dust settles down on the inside.

Having explained the movement of the frigid and fervid forces, Ma draws a diagram to illustrate his point. It consists of three concentric

circles. The central circle, which represents movement toward the center, is labeled "frigid," and the outermost circle, which represents movement toward the periphery, is labeled "fervid." Ma then refers explicitly, for one of the few times in the text, to Chinese teachings. He provides the famous diagram of *tai-chi*, which represents yang on the right side and yin on the left, and he says that the circle of fervid and frigid provides a more adequate representation of the nature of things.

The differentiation of the Dust into fervid and frigid gives rise to a second level of bodily creation, which is fire and water, and these in turn produce the third level, that of the four elements. The elements, still under the influence of fervid and frigid, give rise to heaven (manifesting the fervid) and earth (the frigid), then to the three progeny, and finally to human beings. In each succeeding level, the interplay of forces becomes more complex, but Ma frequently refers back to the original divine duality of knowledge and power. So also, in the remaining four chapters he sometimes mentions the complementarity of the two divine attributes or that of frigid and fervid, to explain how creation and transformation bring about the differentiation of the universe in its entirety. In the last chapter, he illustrates how the same two forces are harnessed in the reverse movement, which reintegrates all things in the Real One through the activities of human beings.

## Translations into Chinese

Few Islamic works are known for certain to have been translated into Chinese, and the Koran itself was not translated in its entirety until 1927.<sup>36</sup> The primary or secondary literature sometimes mentions that a given book is a translation, but these statements need to be treated with caution. Traditional Chinese authors spoke of translations rather loosely, and the authors of most of the secondary literature have been conversant with Chinese but unfamiliar with the Islamic languages. If a book is to be called a "translation," it should certainly have two characteristics. First, the original text should be available for comparison. Second, the work should follow the original text rather closely, not simply be inspired by it. Drawing the line here may not be easy, but some attempt should be made, and this cannot be done without having both texts available.

In trying to track down books with both of these characteristics, I have been able to discover only three works—three of the four Persian Sufi texts mentioned as having been translated into Chinese. Although I am reasonably certain that the fourth, *Maqṣad-i aqṣā*, was also translated, I have not seen the Chinese text and can judge only on the basis of a description made by Palladius in the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> The originals

of these four works are all well enough known to be among the small number of Sufi books to have been translated at least partially into English.

The first, *Mirṣād al-ʿibād min al-mabdaʾ ilaʾl-maʿād* ("The path of God's servants from the origin to the return"), was written by Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 654/1256), an important master of the Kubrawī Sufi order. It was translated as *Kuei-chen yao-tao* in the year 1670 by Wu Tzu-hsien, who is believed by some scholars to have been a student of Wang Tai-yü.<sup>38</sup> This is by far the longest of the four works, and the Persian text is deservedly the most famous and widely read. It can be considered, as its English translator puts it, "the summation of the historical elaboration of Sufism" down to the thirteenth century, when there was an extraordinary flowering of Sufi literature. It is a thorough exposition of right understanding, the second dimension of Islam, with the aim of inspiring Muslims to engage themselves in the third dimension, that of spiritual aspiration. It deals in a relatively systematic manner with the nature of human beings as the linchpin of cosmic existence and universal equilibrium. It describes the prophets as the guides to ultimate happiness and presents a detailed enumeration of the ascending levels of human perfection. It discusses the various modes of unveiling and spiritual vision that the travelers may witness in their journeys to God, and describes their final attainment to the Divine Presence. It explains that human beings have been given charge of fashioning their own souls during their sojourn in this world and that, in the next world, they will find themselves divided into four basic types, depending on the nature of the soul that they have achieved. A final section devotes eight chapters to explaining how various sorts of people should follow the path to God—kings, ministers, scholars, the wealthy, farmers, merchants, and craftsmen.

Among the qualities that have made *Mirṣād al-ʿibād* a classic are the clarity, fluency, and beauty of its prose. Although it deals with issues that remain abstruse in the hands of theologians and philosophers, it avoids technical discussions and uses the imagery and analogies of everyday language. The result has been an extraordinarily popular book, read throughout the eastern lands of Islam as a guide to all dimensions of the path to God. Although understanding the book does not demand training in the technical Islamic sciences, it does require a degree of knowledge of the tradition that would have made its translation into Chinese no easy task. On the whole, Wu Tzu-hsien is as faithful to the original as one could hope, and he is helped in his efforts by the nature of the text, rooted more in imagery than in technical discourse. Nonetheless, when the discussion enters areas that would be difficult for Chinese readers to understand without detailed commentary, he is not averse to dropping the passage.

The second of the four texts is *Maqṣad-i aqṣā* by the well-known Sufi ʿAzīz al-Dīn Nasafī (d. ca 700/1300), also a master of the Kubrawī order.