

The Importance of Sufism in Chinese Islam

Sachiko Murata¹

William C. Chittick²

Cemalnur Sargut Hocam asked us to say something about the significance of the Kenan Rifai Chair of Islamic Studies at Peking University, which we inaugurated in the Spring of 2012. As many of you know, the Kenan Rifai Chair is housed in The Institute of Advanced Humanistic Studies. The Institute was founded by Professor Tu Weiming in 2010,

- 1 Sachiko Murata, born in 1943, completed her BA in family law at Chiba University in Japan, worked for a year in a law firm in Tokyo, and then went to Iran to study Islamic law. She completed a PhD in Persian literature at Tehran University in 1971, and then transferred to the faculty of theology, where she was the first woman and the first non-Muslim to be enrolled. She finished her MA in Islamic jurisprudence in 1975, and while continuing work on her PhD dissertation in law she became a research associate at the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy. Her work on her second PhD was cut short by the revolution. Since 1983 she has taught religious studies at Stony Brook. She taught “Muslim Confucius” and other Islamic Thoughts classes at Peking University, Kenan Rifai Islamic Research Chair, which was established by Turkish Women’s Cultural Association (TURK-KAD) since 2012. In this class, she used a book on a Chinese scholar Huiru from Ibn Arabi School, which she prepared with William C. Chittick and Weiming Tu.
- 2 Born and raised in Milford, Connecticut, William C. Chittick did his B.A. in history at the College of Wooster (Ohio) and then went to Iran, where he completed a Ph.D. in Persian literature at Tehran University in 1974. He taught comparative religion in the humanities department at Aryamehr Technical University in Tehran and, for a short period before the revolution, was assistant professor at the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy. He returned to the United States in January, 1979. For three years he was assistant editor at the Encyclopaedia Iranica (Columbia University), and from 1983 he has taught religious studies at Stony Brook. He served as Kenan Rifai Islamic Research professor at Peking University in 2012. Chittick is author and translator of thirty books and one hundred-fifty articles on Islamic thought, Sufism, Shi’ism, and Persian literature. Chittick regularly teaches Islam, Islamic Classics, and other courses in religious studies. On occasion he directs qualified students in the reading of Arabic or Persian texts. He is currently working on several research projects in Sufism and Islamic philosophy.

shortly after he retired after thirty years at Harvard. During our time in China we taught one course at Peking University, another at Minzu University, and we participated in several conferences and workshops. We met many of the foremost Chinese scholars of Islam and we had a number of talented students.

From the outset it was our understanding that the first task of the Kenan Rifai Chair would be to help Chinese Muslims re-establish links with their own intellectual tradition. It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that the twentieth century was disastrous for Islam in China. Muslims had lived in China for fifteen hundred years and had founded flourishing communities in many parts of the country. Today there are at least thirty million Chinese Muslims. Many belong to ethnic minorities, but many more are indistinguishable from non-Muslim Chinese.

After the communist revolution of 1949, all forms of religion and tradition were treated as the enemy, in practice if not in theory. Islam was singled out for special persecution, not least because it had always been considered a foreign import. Still today many Muslims hide their Islamic identity because of the prejudice against them. One of the results of persecution was that a generation of scholars was lost and the intellectual links with the past were broken.

When China opened up to the outside world thirty years ago, Muslim communities were able to send students abroad with the aim of regaining Islamic knowledge. A new generation of scholars and ulama appeared, but they have received their learning in places like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. They have some knowledge of Qur'an, hadith, and Shariah, but they tend to be indoctrinated with the ideologies of the Islamist movements. Moreover, they have no training in the traditional intellectual fields like Sufism and philosophy. And it is the Sufi and philosophical dimensions of Islam that had determined the nature of the Islam of their Chinese forefathers. In other words, the new ulama come back to China without the Islamic learning that would allow them to understand the teachings of the great Chinese Muslims of the past.



Perhaps the best way to grasp the difference between the new forms of Chinese Islam and that of the past is to observe the difference between the traditional and the modern architecture of Chinese mosques. Wherever there are sizable Muslim populations, new mosques are sprouting up like mushrooms. Financed mostly by Saudi money, these are gaudy concrete monstrosities. In contrast, the few mosques that were not de-

stroyed during the Cultural Revolution are barely distinguishable from Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist temples. They are beautiful examples of traditional Chinese architecture, seamlessly integrated with their natural and social surroundings. They illustrate the Far Eastern ideal of balance and harmony—an ideal that is of course displayed in old mosques throughout the Islamic world. In the Chinese case, you can only recognize the traditional mosques as mosques from up close, when much of the apparently Chinese calligraphy turns out to be Arabic. The insides of these mosques are unquestionably Muslim places of prayer, even if the general ambience is fully harmonious with traditional Chinese forms.

The contrast between traditional and modern Chinese mosques is reflected in the intellectual discord between traditional and modern Chinese Islam. The old style Islamic thought fits seamlessly into Far Eastern civilization, and the new style attacks traditional Chinese and Islamic forms like noxious and destructive weeds. Traditional Chinese Islam harmonizes with Chinese civilization for one main reason, which is that it is thoroughly imbued with the inner dimensions of Islamic teachings—what is commonly called Sufism. This rootedness allowed the Chinese Muslims to see the splendor of the truth resonating in Chinese civilization. They took seriously the teaching that God sent prophets to all peoples, and they saw prophetic wisdom in Chinese cultural and literary forms, even if they thought that most Chinese had lost touch with the real meaning of that wisdom. The ability to see into and beyond external forms is of course a hallmark of Sufi teachers throughout Islamic history.

• • •

We were introduced to traditional Chinese Islam in 1994 when the two of us attended a conference on dialogue between Islam and Confucianism at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. One of the Chinese presenters at the conference, a scholar from Singapore, gave a paper on Wang Daiyu, who wrote the first book on Islam in the Chinese language, which was published in 1642.³ We were fascinated by the paper, and upon returning to the United States, Dr. Murata found several books by Wang Daiyu and other Chinese Muslims in the Yenching library at Harvard. We decided to study one of the books of Wang Daiyu, and Professor Tu Weiming, who had also attended the conference

³ See Sachiko Murata, *The First Islamic Classic in Chinese: Wang Daiyu's Real Commentary on the True Teaching* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017).

in Kuala Lumpur, agreed to read the text along with us.

As we gradually discovered, Wang Daiyu stood at the beginning of a movement that lasted into the beginning of the twentieth century, though it was largely eclipsed by the political and social turmoil that followed. Modern scholars have commonly called this movement the “Han Kitab,” using a Chinese-Arabic compound meaning “the Chinese Books.” Dozens of Muslim scholars after Wang Daiyu published Chinese-language books on Islam, and these scholars came to be known as the Huiru, the “Muslim Confucians.” They were called “Confucian” because of their firm grounding in the Confucian classics and their remarkable ability to express the teachings of Islam in the language that had been familiar to the intellectual elite of China for centuries.

Professor Tu agreed to assist us in our study of Wang Daiyu because he, like us, recognized in the Muslim-Confucian texts an example of religious dialogue much more profound and meaningful than the sort of discussions that usually go on today. We found this especially true when, after five years of studying Wang Daiyu, we turned our full attention to a second Muslim scholar, Liu Zhi, who began publishing at the beginning of the eighteenth century. He is a perfect example of a Muslim Confucian. He was thoroughly versed in Neo-Confucianism, the school of thought that has dominated East Asian intellectual history over the past one thousand years. This is a form of Confucianism that addressed the challenges of its two main rivals, Daoism and Buddhism, and developed extensive teachings about the nature of the universe and the human self—topics that were not highlighted in the Confucian classics. Liu Zhi, on the basis of his profound Neo-Confucian and Islamic learning, wrote a trilogy about Islamic teachings. The first volume deals with the overall Islamic worldview, the second with the rationale behind Islamic rituals and social practices, and the third with the life of the Prophet, who is the embodiment of Islamic theory and practice.

In order to understand the significance of the Muslim-Confucian synthesis developed by Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi, and others, we need to keep in mind the manner in which Islamic thought developed over history, especially in the Persianate lands of Islam, which extend from Albania to China. For example, although al-Ghazālī was widely known and universally recognized as a great synthesizer of the various branches of Islamic learning, his influence was overshadowed by later figures who wrote books addressed to a wider audience. Some of the best examples of these later authors are poets like ‘Aṭṭār, Mawlānā Rūmī, and Ḥāfiz,

who were among the most influential propagators of the mature Islamic worldview. Their poetry is permeated with explanations of the key themes of Islamic thought, but it is readily accessible to any Persian reader. Throughout most of the Persianate lands, Mawlānā was a far more influential teacher of Islam than al-Ghazālī—even if we have not yet found much evidence that the Persian poets were widely read in China.

For that matter, al-Ghazālī was also largely unknown in China. The most influential author among the Confucian Muslims seems rather to have been Ibn ‘Arabī, as seen through the filter of Persian books written by ‘Azīz Nasafī and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, two of the three scholars whose books were translated into Chinese before the twentieth century. The third scholar was Najm al-Dīn Rāzī, the author of *Mirṣād al-‘ibād*. This book became one of the most popular textbooks of Islamic teachings among the Chinese Muslims.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s popularity throughout the Persianate world derived from that fact that he offered a vision of God, the universe, and the human soul that was far more comprehensive than that offered by any other Muslim thinker before or after him. The major characteristic of the worldview that he developed—the broad outlines of which were shared by most Muslim scholars—can be called anthropocosmism. Professor Tu Weiming uses this word to describe the Far Eastern worldview as developed by the great Neo-Confucian thinkers. An anthropocosmic vision is one that looks on the universe and human self as two sides of the same living reality.

The Muslim Confucians recognized that this Islamic anthropocosmic vision translated easily into Confucian terminology because of its parallels with Chinese thought. If they based their major teachings on specific texts by Nasafī, Jāmī, and Najm al-Dīn Rāzī, it was not because of some accident of history, but precisely because these texts provided clear and systematic examples of the anthropocosmic vision.

If you ask Muslims today which Arabic texts should be translated into other languages, most would respond with Qur’an, Hadith, and various works on jurisprudence, perhaps some Kalam, and maybe al-Ghazālī. The Confucian Muslims, however, did not translate any Arabic works. Of course they themselves read Arabic because they were trained in the Islamic sciences. But the issue for them was not what you need to know to be a scholar of Islam. The issue was rather what the Muslim community needs to understand in order to accept the Islamic worldview and

to live accordingly. It is good to teach people how to say their prayers, perform the other rituals, recite the Qur'an, and observe Islamic law. But how do you explain to them, in their own language, the necessity of doing these things? In other words, you cannot simply tell people that you must do x, y, and z "because God says so"—even if most mullas tell people precisely this. If people are to accept and follow certain guidelines, they must have good reasons for doing so. Given that the Islamic guidelines shape every dimension of human life, their rationale needs to be stronger than the rationale for anything else. This was the quandary faced by the Confucian Muslims: how do you explain convincingly, in the Chinese language, the worldview lying behind Islamic ritual and social teachings.

The Huiru solved their quandary by writing and translating books that explained the meaning of existence, the role of human beings in the cosmos, the consequences of human action, and the necessity of prophetic guidance. In order to carry these ideas over into the Chinese language, they had to be masters of Chinese thought, and that meant thorough familiarity not only with Neo-Confucianism, but also with Daoism and Buddhism. In the Islamic sources such issues were addressed precisely by the Sufi teachers.



Let us conclude by saying that the four hundred years between the death of al-Ghazālī and the death of Jāmī was one of the most creative and productive periods in Islamic intellectual history. Practically all of the great philosophers, theologians, Sufis, and poets who appeared during this period saw reality in terms of an anthropocosmic vision, and it was this vision that they expressed in their works. They understood the goal of human life to be the achievement of a transformed perception of reality, in which man and the universe function in perfect harmony. They saw the road leading to this vision as embodied in the prophets, beginning with Adam and culminating with Muhammad.

Without knowledge of the manner in which these Muslim sages and thinkers expressed this unitary, anthropocosmic vision and how they understood it as the very vision of the Koran, it is impossible to see that the line of transmission of Islamic thought from al-Ghazālī down to the Muslim Confucians is in fact unbroken. If Chinese Muslims today cannot grasp that the principles and most of the details of their ancestors' thought are drawn directly from sophisticated expositions of the Islamic vision written by great Muslim scholars, they will imagine

that they must reject their own intellectual heritage. They will try to re-invent the Islamic vision on the basis of information imported from the West and the various politicized forms of Islam that dominate so much of contemporary discourse in the Middle East. It is the task of the Kenan Rifai Chair in China to remind the Chinese world of the rich Islamic resources for understanding the human situation that are present in their own language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Murata, Sachiko. *The First Islamic Classic in Chinese: Wang Daiyu's Real Commentary on the True Teaching*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017.