

# Liu Zhi:

## A Leading Chinese Muslim Scholar and Saint

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What is recorded in the books of Islam (*tianfang*) is no different from what is in the Confucian canon. Observing and practicing the proprieties of Islam is like observing and practicing the teachings of the ancient sages and kings.

Liu Zhi, *Tianfang dianli*

Liu Zhi (ca.1670-1739), also known as Liu Jia Lian, was born in the former Chinese imperial capital of Nanjing.<sup>1</sup> Little is known about his background and personal life – only that his relatives considered him too studious and, therefore, quite dull! He was, however, a member of China's Hui community. With roots stretching back to the seventh century, the Hui were (and continue to be) a sizable community of Sinicised Muslims.<sup>2</sup> Originally descended from a transient population of Persian and Arab merchants, by the seventeenth century the Hui were fully acculturated Chinese Muslims: they spoke Chinese, wore Chinese clothing and observed Chinese customs. Because of (in some cases centuries of) intermarriage, they also appeared physically identical to the Han (China's dominant ethnic group).<sup>3</sup> Despite this level of acculturation, however, the Hui maintained their Islamic heritage: a Ḥanafī-based form of Islam coloured by traditional Chinese culture. Often termed *gedimu* (from the Arabic *qadīm*, meaning 'old'),<sup>4</sup> from the seventeenth century onwards this type of Islam was further supplemented by various Sufi *ṭarīqa* – in particular, the Qādarī,

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. 'Liu Chih.'

<sup>2</sup> According Hui legend, their community was first established by "Sa Ha Bo Sa Ha Di Wo Ge Si" – that is, by the *ṣaḥāba* Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqās, the Prophet Muḥammad's maternal uncle. The Hui claim that Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqās travelled to China during the reign of the Gaozong Emperor (r.649-683). According to the Hui, he met Gaozong, who became favourably impressed with Islam's teachings, feeling them to be akin to Confucianism. As a result, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqās was allowed to remain in China and build the first mosque; erected in Guangzhou, the Hui claim Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqās's grave can still be seen there. See Haiyun Ma, 'The Mythology of [the] Prophet's Ambassadors in China: Histories of Sa'd Waqqas and Gess in Chinese Sources,' *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 3 (2006): 446.

<sup>3</sup> Raphael Israeli, *Islam in China: Religion, Ethnicity, Culture, and Politics* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002), 113.

<sup>4</sup> Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 37.

Naqshbandī and Kubrawī.<sup>5</sup> Liu Zhi was born into the heart of this cultural milieu, at a point when the *gedimu* and Sufi traditions were beginning to interact. By the end of his life, he would be the Hui's leading scholar, representing the pinnacle of their intellectual tradition. Even today, and despite the increasing influence of Wahhabi thought throughout modern-day China, for whom both the *gedimu* and Sufism are anathema, Liu Zhi's ideas remain popular amongst Chinese Muslims in general.<sup>6</sup>

Turning to Liu Zhi's education, this began in his native Nanjing, in a school established by the leading Hui educational master, Yuan Shengzhi. A relative of Liu Zhi's father, Liu Hanying (also known as Liu Sanjie), Yuan Shengzhi was a disciple of the great Chinese Muslim educational reformer, Hu Dengzhou (also known as either Puchao or Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Ilyās, d.1597). Often called *taishi* (Great Teacher), during his lifetime Hu Dengzhou travelled widely in the Islamic world and, after encountering many great centres of Islamic learning, became deeply concerned about the plight of Hui Islamic education. When he returned to his homeland, he therefore began work on establishing a rejuvenated education system; at its centre he proposed that *gedimu* learning be transmitted, not in the ancestral Hui languages of Persian and Arabic, and as had previously been the case, but in Chinese (by then the *lingua franca* of the Hui community).

Beginning in his home county of Xianyang (in Shaanxi province), Hu Dengzhou used this founding principle to create a new brand of Chinese-language-based Islamic learning. By the seventeenth century, this had spread to several important Hui centres – including Xian, Jining, Kaifeng and Nanjing.<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, however, Hu Dengzhou's decision to express Islamic learning in a non-Islamic idiom provided the inspiration for a radically different approach to Islamic thought. Known as the Hān Kitāb (*han qitabu*, literally meaning a Chinese Islamic book), this new school of thought tried to perfect the *gedimu*'s blend of Islamic and Chinese customs via a systematic positioning of Islamic teachings within a broader context of orthodox Chinese tradition.<sup>8</sup> By the time of his death in 1739, Liu Zhi would encapsulate the culmination of this philosophical approach; the seeds planted in his

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<sup>5</sup> Dru C. Gladney, *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and other Subaltern Groups* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 128-30.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Sachiko Murata, William C. Chittick and Tu Weiming, *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. 'Chinese Muslim Literature.'

mind by Yuan Shengzhi's Nanjing religious school would blossom into the epitome of what could be achieved within the boundaries of the *Hān Kitāb*.<sup>9</sup>

But, before Liu Zhi could reach this potential, he had to undertake an extensive programme of study. Beginning at age fifteen, he spent eight years studying the traditional Chinese classics and histories, followed by a further six years studying Arabic and Islamic texts. He then moved on to Buddhism (three years) and Daoism (one year), before rounding off his education with one hundred and thirty-seven Western (*Xiyang*) books – a collection of European texts introduced into seventeenth-century China by the Jesuits.<sup>10</sup> Exposure to this programme of study gave Liu Zhi an extremely broad intellectual foundation; not only was he fully versed in the Islamic tradition, but equally well qualified to be a member of the Chinese literati. This joint identity, however, led to an important realisation: utilising the breadth of his knowledge, Liu Zhi developed a conviction that Islam's universal nature meant that Islamic thought could not be inward looking. In his own words:

“The sacred book is the sacred book of Islam, but *li* [justice] is the same *li* which exists everywhere under Heaven.”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, and building on his Sincised *gedimu* heritage, Liu Zhi considered both Islam and Confucianism to be an expression of the same universal truth. Just like the Prophet Muḥammad, Liu Zhi held both Confucius and the other Chinese sages to be the bearers of Divine inspiration. On this basis, Liu Zhi developed a strong desire to reach out to the Confucian Chinese establishment and reconcile them to Islam.<sup>12</sup>

With this imperative in mind, after completing his studies Liu Zhi took up residence at the foot of Nanjing's Qingliangshan Mountain, in a studio called *Saoyelou* (House of Sweeping Leaves). There he began translating Arabic texts into Chinese. In addition, however, he also composed several hundred Chinese-language manuscripts, all seeking to relate Islam to Confucianism. Although only one tenth of these were ever published, three became very influential: the *Tianfang Xingli* (The Principles of Islam, published in 1704),<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 144-5.

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. 'Liu Chih.'

<sup>11</sup> Cited in J. F. Ford, 'Some Chinese Muslims of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,' *Asian Affairs* 5, no. 2 (1974): 150.

<sup>12</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. 'Liu Chih.'

<sup>13</sup> See Murata, Chittick and Tu, *Sage Learning*.

the *Tianfang Dianli* (The Rules and Proprieties of Islam, 1710)<sup>14</sup> and the *Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu* (The Record of the Prophet of Islam, 1724).<sup>15</sup> The first focused on *uṣūl al-dīn* (specifically, on *tawḥīd*, *nubuwwa* and *ma'ād*), the second on *furū' al-dīn* (the branches and applications of faith), and the last on a biography of the Prophet (based primarily on a Persian translation of the work of Muḥammad ibn Mas'ūd Kāzarūnī, d.1357).<sup>16</sup> Significantly, Liu Zhi intended these three texts to be read together; through them he was attempting to describe three of the four stages of Sufism – namely, the *sharī'a* (i.e. the way), the *ṭarīqa* (the teachings) and the *ḥaqīqa* (the Reality of God, as embodied in the example of the Prophet). His neglect of the fourth Sufi stage, however, *ma'rifa* (final mystical knowledge of God) was deliberate; Liu Zhi's intention was to parallel traditional Chinese philosophy, where discussions began with the *dao* (theoretical underpinning), before moving on to the *jiao* (the concrete, relative and practical vehicle of the *dao*) and then the Sage who acted as the bridge between these points.<sup>17</sup> In other words, Liu Zhi was aiming to express Islam in the same terms as traditional Chinese thought.

Indeed, to further facilitate this task, Liu Zhi adopted a very unconventional approach to his topic. His work on *furū' al-dīn*, for example, is by no means typical of the genre. Most Islamic texts falling under this heading are works of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), designed to illustrate methods of *ibāda* (such as prayer). Liu Zhi's discussion, however, centred on the theoretical underpinnings behind the Islamic rituals. In other words, he was not interested in describing how (for example) Muslims pray (and, indeed, his text cannot be used as a guide on that matter), but only with establishing why they pray. While delving into these theological matters, Liu Zhi highlighted numerous parallels between Islamic teachings and those of the ancient Chinese sages, frequently expressing Islamic concepts in Confucian terms. As a result, he managed to bridge the gap between the two traditions, merging their essential ideologies into a single whole. Certainly, his efforts in this regard were by no means unsuccessful: Liu Zhi's biography of the Prophet was honoured with a preface by the Vice-Minister of the Board of Ritual, who wrote:

“The ancient Confucian doctrine has been undermined at different times by Buddhists and Taoists...now, however, in this book of Liu Zhi we see once more

<sup>14</sup> See James D. Frankel, *Rectifying God's Name: Liu Zhi's Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> See Isaac Mason, *The Arabian Prophet: A Life of Mohammed from Chinese and Arabic Sources, a Chinese Muslim Work by Liu Chia-lien* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1921).

<sup>16</sup> Murata, Chittick and Tu, *Sage Learning*, 6-9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 8-9.

the way of the ancient sages, Yao and Shun, King Wen and King Wu and Confucius. Thus, although this book explains Islam, in truth it illuminates our Confucianism.”<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, the Vice-Minister of the Board of War contributed a preface to Liu Zhi’s book on *furū‘ al-dīn*, stating that the minister, while discussing Islam with Liu Zhi, had come to the realisation that it upheld traditional Confucian values (such as loyalty to the Sovereign, filial piety and brotherly love).<sup>19</sup>

Liu Zhi’s appeal to traditional Chinese values, however, did not result in a neglect of his Islamic learning. On the contrary, the above three texts referenced a total of sixty-six Islamic sources. Although varied in nature, many of these were Ishrāqī (or Illuminationist) Sufi works from the Central Asian Kubrawī *ṭarīqa*. Thus, the two works Liu Zhi cited the most were both Kubrawī: the *Mirṣād al-‘ibād min al-mabda’ ila’l-ma‘ād* of Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d.1247) and the *Maqṣad-i aqsā* of ‘Azīz Nasafī (d.ca.1300). In addition, Liu Zhi also drew upon Shāfi’ī works and the mystical philosophy of Ibn ‘Arabī – Nasafī, for example, as a disciple of Sa’d al-Dīn Ḥammūyya (d.1252), was both a Shāfi’ī scholar and a follower of Ibn ‘Arabī. Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy also entered Liu Zhi’s work via two other important texts: the *Ashī‘at al-lama‘āt* and the *Lawā’ih*, both by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d.1492).<sup>20</sup>

By drawing upon both Islamic and Chinese texts, Liu Zhi demonstrated a truly international mind set. Determined to fully reconcile the Chinese and Islamic intellectual traditions, he was unafraid to highlight commonalities between the traditions and see in them the hand of God. After his death, Liu Zhi became a local *walī* (saint) in northwest China, where his name appears in many hagiographical texts as the spiritual forbearer of several important regional *shaykhs*.<sup>21</sup> Liu Zhi’s grave, located outside the southern gate of Nanjing, is still an object of veneration for many Chinese Muslims today.<sup>22</sup>

### Further Reading

Benite, Zvi Ben-Dor. *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005.

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<sup>18</sup> Cited in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. ‘Liu Chih.’

<sup>19</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. ‘Liu Chih.’

<sup>20</sup> Murata, Chittick and Tu, *Sage Learning*, 10-14.

<sup>21</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. ‘Chinese Muslim Literature.’

<sup>22</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. ‘Liu Chih.’

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