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Review: Being What We Read: Perennialism in Chinese Islamic Studies

Reviewed Work(s): The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms.

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reputation. Chiang remains an ambitious, wily man who against the odds established his leadership of the Nationalist Party and the Nanking government. Once in position, he intended to build a modern autocratic Chinese state that combined Neo-Confucian values and many qualities of European fascism. Chiang's marriage into the Soong family proved a key to winning over American support for his government. U.S. assistance was critical to Chiang's government during the war against Japan and continued to be essential after 1950 while reconstituting the Nationalist government in Taiwan. Nevertheless, Chiang regarded most American envoys and their leaders in Washington with considerable distrust. He continued to reject American efforts to establish an independent Republic of China on Taiwan and to resist American calls for more democracy on Taiwan. Chiang's combination of strategic dependence upon the U.S. coupled with distrust of American constancy is a lesson many leaders of smaller states have learned well.

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NOTES

1. Hannah Pakula, *The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-shek and the Birth of Modern China* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009); Laura Tyson Li, *Madame Chiang Kai-shek: China's Eternal First Lady* (New York: Atlantic Press, 2006).
2. Donald was in the employ of Chiang Kai-shek and Soong Mayling at the time of the kidnapping and flew to Xi'an at her request. Donald did not speak Chinese, but Zhang Xueliang was fluent in English. Donald previously had worked for Zhang Xueliang in Manchuria and knew both men intimately. Earl Albert Selle, *Donald of China* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), p. 327.



Being What We Read: Perennialism in Chinese Islamic Studies

Sachiko Murata, William C. Chittick, and Tu Weiming. *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms*. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009.

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As often as we remark that long-married couples begin to look like each other over time, or owners come to resemble their pets, could we not say the same about

scholars and their topics of study? When we research and write about historical figures and cultural movements of the past, our subjects have a way of reaching out across the centuries to project their images upon us, transforming us in the process. Surely, we are attracted to study topics that resonate with us personally. Our research subjects also become reflections of our own perspectives and proclivities. We are what we read. What happens, therefore, when a group that includes scholars from Iran, Japan, America, and China read the work of a Muslim literatus of the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911)? How could such an eclectic gathering of intellectuals, with expertise ranging from Islamic sciences to Chinese metaphysics to Arabic and Persian poetry to Confucian philosophy, bear any resemblance to a Chinese Muslim writer who died nearly three hundred years ago? That the Chinese Muslim writer himself excelled in all of these disciplines helps. Therefore, the answer certainly includes the content of their work, but it is grounded perhaps even more deeply in the nature of their collaboration and a common worldview, a perspective these contemporary scholars seem to share with the Chinese Muslim scholar Liu Zhi (ca. 1660–ca. 1730).

The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms is an important addition to the growing body of English-language scholarship on the indigenous Islamic intellectual tradition of late imperial China. This work again brings together the power couple of Islamic studies, Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, both of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, with Tu Weiming, Harvard's preeminent authority on Confucian thought; this trio had previously collaborated on *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (State University of New York Press, 2000). Providing his aegis and contributing a foreword to *Sage Learning*, senior Islamicist and perennial philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr of George Washington University joins this elite team. Nasr's presence in this project of translation, analysis, and contextualization of Liu Zhi's work is, in fact, the linchpin that makes *Sage Learning* the reflection of its subject matter.

Liu Zhi was a product (some would say the finest product) of the reformed Chinese Muslim educational system that emerged in the sixteenth century when Hu Dengzhou (1522–1597) returned from a long journey to Central Asia and the Middle East in search of Islamic knowledge. The new texts that Hu introduced to the mosque schools of China needed to be translated for use by predominantly Sinophone students. The proliferation of Islamic texts in Chinese led to the emergence of a transregional network of Chinese-speaking Muslim scholars and students in China, many of whom were also versed in the Confucian classics. This network developed into an elite literati in its own right, known as the Huiru (Muslim Confucians), who produced a corpus of texts known as the Han Kitāb, a hybrid Chinese-Arabic name meaning "Islamic books in Chinese." As a member of the Huiru, Liu Zhi was one of the most renowned and prolific of the Han Kitāb authors.

Operating as a literati class comparable to the Confucian elite, the Huiru were organized into lineages based on a combination of both familial and intellectual ties. Herein we find a compelling resemblance between the writers of *Sage Learning* and their subject. Long before writing the foreword to their book, Nasr had been Chittick's and Murata's mentor when they were students in Iran in the 1970s. While it is not unusual for a scholar to solicit such blessings from his or her intellectual forebears, the similarity between this and Huiru practice is striking. Notably, in the generation before Liu Zhi, Ma Zhu (b. 1640) traveled the length and breadth of China collecting two dozen ceremonial prefaces and dedications for his *Qingzhen zhinan* (Guide to Islam), including ones from Liu Zhi's principal teacher, Yuan Ruqi, and Liu Zhi's father, Liu Sanjie. For each of his major works, Liu Zhi similarly sought out prominent literati, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to write on his behalf.

In *Chinese Gleams*, Murata and Chittick had brought Tu on board to lend his weighty authority on Confucianism and Chinese religion and philosophy to the project. He wrote a foreword that nicely contextualized Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi, the Huiru, and the Han Kitāb generally in the intellectual history of the late Ming–early Qing period. Similarly, Tu's epilogue to *Sage Learning* is reminiscent of prefaces contributed by Liu Zhi's non-Muslim Confucian colleagues in that it helps place the main work into the larger context of Chinese religio-philosophical discourse, effectively legitimizing the Han Kitāb as a branch of Confucian studies. Tu's observations about the significance of Liu Zhi's first major work, *Tianfang xingli* (Nature and principle in Islam)—that it broadens “the philosophical horizons of Confucian thinkers” and “has enriched and enlarged the Confucian discourse” (p. 617)—echo the often-cited 1708 preface to the same book by Xu Yuanzheng: “[A]lthough this book was written to explain Islam, it actually glorifies and magnifies our own Confucianism.”¹¹

Old friends Tu and Nasr have collaborated since 1994 in a high-level Islamic-Confucian dialogue evocative of the collegial ties among the Huiru and the literati elite outside their faith community. Moreover, the existence of such a bilateral religio-philosophical discourse reminds us of the essential nature and *raison d'être* of the Han Kitāb: the expression of Islamic truths in a Confucian context. However, Nasr's foreword goes even beyond this objective and serves to bring the narrow and somewhat esoteric subject matter of *Sage Learning* into the widest of all possible contexts, that of universal truth. As Nasr describes his own role in the collaborative efforts with Tu, Murata, and Chittick over more than a decade as “helping to create and intellectual framework” for the study of the Han Kitāb (p. vii). This framework recognizes the cultural and historical importance of this convergence of Chinese and Islamic thought to the fields of comparative philosophy and religion, especially in light of the contemporary academic and political discourse on civilizations. More than this, Nasr writes, the writings of Liu Zhi and other Huiru

are of great interest for their innate metaphysical and philosophical value and for understanding the manner in which the masters of the Han Kitāb crossed religious and civilizational frontiers and created harmony between two intellectual worlds through an appeal to the underlying unity that constitutes the basis of the perennial philosophy. (p. ix)

Nasr is an unabashed perennialist who affirms the unity and universality of the Truth, wherever and whenever it manifests itself. Representatives of exclusivist religious traditions have opposed this point of view because it contradicts the claim that their particular dogmas are the unique repository of unquestionable Truth. Perennialism has also been challenged within the academy by contextualists (or constructivists), who maintain that the truth of any proposition or entity can only be asserted relative to its specific context, whether historical, geographical, cultural, or social. Contextualism is a form of relativism whose adherents reject what they consider to be the untenable essentialism of philosophies such as perennialism. Delving just beneath the surface of this academic debate, we find a struggle of worldviews, between camps of believers and disbelievers. Many perennialists believe that the universal Truth to which they subscribe is of a nonhuman, suprarational—some would say divine—source, which most contextualists eschew or deny.

While this academic debate between perennialists and contextualists may be a relatively recent development of the twentieth century, the nature of the perennial philosophy is by definition timeless and ubiquitous. Thus, Nasr finds among the Huiru scholars who share his perspective. In his efforts to harmonize Islam and Confucianism—to find a core of universal Truth on both sides of his dual intellectual heritage—Liu Zhi may be counted among these kindred perennialist thinkers. His use of the term “sage” (Ch. *sheng*) to refer both to Confucius and to the Prophet Muhammad is an extension of Mencius’s doctrine of universal sagehood, further articulated by the Song dynasty Neo-Confucian Lu Xiangshan (1139–1192), who proclaimed that sages appear in various ages around the world, but all share the same principle of Truth. In Liu Zhi’s words, “they were of one mind. Thus their Way (*dao*) is the same.”² The Han Kitāb writers, their Muslim constituency, and their non-Muslim colleagues, on the one hand, and the authors of *Sage Learning*, on the other, resemble each other in that they all seem to be of one mind.

The perennial philosophy of a universal Truth shared by the Islamic and Chinese religious, philosophical, and mystical traditions is certainly an undertone of *Sage Learning* and a common perspective among its eclectic team of authors. However, their scholarship is what makes the book a valuable contribution to the field. At its heart, *Sage Learning* contains a fully annotated translation of Liu Zhi’s *Tianfang xingli*, primarily the combined work of Murata and Chittick, but it also provides much more. The early sections introduce us to Liu Zhi and his cultural milieu, including the historical information about previous generations of the Huiru, the production of the Han Kitāb corpus, and the Islamic (especially Sufi)

texts that were their primary sources. The authors are well acquainted with Liu Zhi's dual Chinese-Islamic heritage and familiarize readers with its debt to both Confucian and Islamic metaphysical and cosmological thought. They retrace terrain previously covered in *Chinese Gleams*, but take the opportunity in their new book to explore and explain the material more clearly and thoroughly than before.

Not surprisingly, given their scholarly backgrounds, Murata and Chittick devote a substantial chapter of the introductory section to the explication of key Islamic concepts, including the Divine Reality in relation to mundane reality, the notion of origin in and return to the Divine Reality, and the difference between transmitted and intuitive knowledge. In this latter discussion, the authors highlight the differences among, as well as the possible harmonization of, three Islamic approaches to knowledge: dogmatic theology, philosophy, and Sufi mysticism. Their discussion of these Islamic "first principles" is essential because they are central to the sources Liu Zhi used in composing the *Tianfang xingli*. In the subsequent chapter, Murata and Chittick provide a useful guide to the Liu Zhi's translation of the Islamic terminology using corresponding Neo-Confucian concepts. This background information is indispensable as the reader embarks on Murata and Chittick's translation of the *Tianfang xingli*, especially in order to decipher the symbolic language of the text's series of metaphysical and cosmological diagrams.

The translation is quite readable, a significant accomplishment given the difficulty of the concepts involved, which is compounded by the layers of linguistic complexity. The value of translation as part of the process of making the Han Kitāb available to an English-speaking audience is doubtless. This expanded audience, as Tu points out, expands the discourse of Confucian as well as Islamic studies. *Sage Learning* will also be of great appeal to historians and religionists with a comparative bent, particularly those driven by an interest in finding commonalities across cultures and time. Readers who are compelled by different approaches to the existential questions asked perennially by human beings will find a kindred mind, not only in Liu Zhi, but also in the team of scholars who have impressively studied him in this book.

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NOTES

1. Xu Yuanzheng, *Xu Xu* (ii), in Liu, Zhi, *Tianfang xingli*, N.P., 1706. Reprint, 1760, p. 4a.
2. Liu Zhi, "Yuanjiao Pian," in *Tianfang dianli zeyao jie* (Reprint, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Muslim Propagation Society, 1971), p. 11.