

Finding the Root Substance: Religious Classification of the Thought of Liu Zhi

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Abstract

During the Qing dynasty in China, starting particularly in the 17th century, Hui Muslim scholars began to develop a distinctive Chinese reinterpretation of Islam based on the preceding Neo-Confucian tradition. In the early 18th century, the work of several such scholars was collected in the *Han Kitab*, a volume compiled by and primarily authored by Liu Zhi. Liu Zhi's approach to Islam is almost exclusively metaphysical, emphasizing the unity of all being, and replaces the formal signifiers of Islam with native Chinese terms. Scholars such as Sachiko Murata and David Lee claim that this is part of a process of "contextualization", by which "dynamic equivalence" with the Arabic and Persian source texts is established. I argue, however, that the substitution of terms with established and rich meaning in the traditions of Chinese thought constitutes "sinicization" - in other words, that this substitution results in such a radical departure from the meaning of the source text that it results in an absorption of some Islamic concepts by the system of Neo-Confucianism, rather than a simple adaptation of Islam into Chinese. I defend this thesis by referring to Liu Zhi's works, particularly *Nature and Principle in Islam*.

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I. Introduction

My paper will contrast the Neo-Confucian Islam developed in the 17th and 18th centuries in China, particularly by the scholar Liu Zhi, with the general picture of Islam, and assess the extent to which this reinterpretation forces a broadening of Islam well beyond the fundamental framework laid down by Muhammad.

During the Qing dynasty in China, starting particularly in the 17th century, Muslim scholars of the Hui ethnic group began to develop a distinctive Chinese reinterpretation of Islam based on the preceding Neo-Confucian tradition. Their works coalesced into the Han Kitab canon. Most prominent among these scholars was Liu Zhi (c. 1670 - c. 1724).

Sachiko Murata has studied Chinese Islam more extensively than any other contemporary scholar, and has produced respected translations of the writings of Liu and his contemporaries. In doing so, her work has revealed a potential rift between mainstream, Abrahamic Islam and this Neo-Confucian variant. Cedric Schurich describes the conception of Islam endorsed by Murata thus: “...before man can start to cultivate the inner virtues, he must learn to follow the bread and butter dos and don’ts as set down in Islam and elaborated by the Sharia.”¹

This view of Islam is very far removed from that found in Liu Zhi. Through an examination of his *Root Classic*, part of his treatise on *Nature and Principle in Islam* (天方性理, *tianfang xingli*), I will show that Liu approaches Islam from a metaphysical angle, emphasizing the oneness of Being, and largely ignoring Sharia and other elements of orthodoxy. His orientation is at least as congruous with the Three Teachings (三教, *sanjiao*) of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism as with the Islam informed by the Qur’an, hadith, sunnah, and Shariah. If Liu breaks with the historical foundations of Islam, mostly ignores the regulatory and devotional elements of the religion, and adopts a metaphysical view of the world undistinguished from that of the Neo-Confucian view of the time, then to what extent can it actually be considered Islamic? I will argue that including such developments as those of Liu Zhi force a broadening of Islam to the point of no longer being a useful designation.

II. The theory of dynamic equivalence

Murata’s primary argument for regarding the Han Kitab as fundamentally Islamic is based on the theory of “dynamic equivalence”. “Liu Zhi’s translation is the dynamic equivalent meaning of the text,” David Lee writes of her thesis, “achieved by using Neo-Confucian terms and concepts as a linguistic tool”.² Murata herself characterizes her project as one of assessing “the intrinsic value of the philosophical and theological ideas

¹ Cedric Schurich, “Review of Murata, *The Vision of Islam*.” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001): 110-113.

² David Lee. *Contextualization of Sufi Spirituality in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century China: The Role of Liu Zhi (c.1662-c.1730)* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

that inform the writings”.³ Another way of representing this is to hold that Liu “contextualized” Islam, as opposed to sinicizing it.

This is precisely the approach that I am attempting to counter here. My contention is that the use of Neo-Confucian terms, let alone its concepts, already results in a significant difference in subjective experience for a Hui Muslim. Even if Liu intended a correspondence with Islamic concepts, such concepts cannot be understood solely through the use of terms that have an entirely different lineage. The very existence of a dynamic equivalence also seems to be ill-supported, if not entirely unsubstantial; if one does classify Liu’s work based on its root content rather than its terminology, one can at least make a strong argument that it still has more in common with preceding Chinese thought than with Islam.

The dynamic equivalence argument in Murata, Chittick, and Tu’s study, *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi*, seems to rest primarily on a broad correspondence between Liu’s writing and the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi on *tawhid* (oneness of God) and *tahqiq* (roughly, intrinsic spiritual knowledge). However, Murata and Chittick themselves seem to define the *tahqiq* approach to Islam in a way that leaves room for excluding any distinguishing factors of Islam:

*The primary aim of those who focused on tahqiq was not to teach dogma or doctrine; nor was it to pass on the received learning or to instruct in proper morality and practice. Such scholars considered the formal aspects of the tradition, with its dogma and doctrines, less important than... the transformation of the soul and conformity with the Supreme Reality.*⁴

The concept of a Supreme Reality is, of course, by no means unique to Islam. Such thinking is found readily in Chinese Buddhism, and it also aligns with the Chinese conception of *tian* (天). However, Liu steps even closer to Chinese Buddhism when he expounds the Supreme (or Muhammadan) Reality in terms of the unity of all things, or of the identity of unity and multiplicity, ideas which are at least as close to the Chinese-developed notion of a universal Buddha-nature, for instance, as to *tawhid*. Furthermore, this conception of *tawhid* is by no means a universal one among Chinese scholars who studied Islam. Liu’s contemporary Wang Daiyu (c. 1590 - c. 1658), who also features prominently in the Han Kitab, conceives of *tawhid* in terms of dogma. Tu Weiming writes that Wang “explains why followers of the Three Teachings... fail to perceive *tawhid* adequately or live up to its demands”.⁵ Therefore, this line of argument does not suffice to firmly establish Liu Zhi’s thought as fundamentally and uniquely Islamic.

³ Murata, Sachiko. "Muslim Approaches to Religious Diversity in China," in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, ed. Joachim Gentz and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 113.

⁴ Sachiko Murata, William Chittick, and Tu Weiming. *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 21.

⁵ Murata, Sachiko, and William Chittick. "The Implicit Dialogue of Confucians and Muslims," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. C. Cornille (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 438-49.

Many of the other claimed examples of direct borrowing or adaptation can also be contested.⁶ Lee, for example, claims the influence of Ibn ‘Arabi in the category of the “perfect human being” or “Embodied One”. However, even this category can be found in preceding Chinese discourse: multiple translators of the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch - a Buddhist scripture dating at least to the 9th century - find the term *zhiren* (直人) and render it Perfect Man.⁷ Its associations with Taoism, furthermore, are extensively documented.

Accordingly, Murata and Chittick write that

*most “Islamic” knowledge is by definition transmitted, since its specifically Islamic color comes by way of its conformity with the Koran and the Hadith... To say ‘Muhammad is God’s messenger’ means to acknowledge that Muhammad was sent by God with a message, and that the message tells people what God wants from them. This knowledge is conveyed first of all in the Koran, and then in the Hadith, dogma, ritual, and rules. The only way to gain it is to receive it by transmission. You cannot discover it in your own heart.*⁸

If Islam “declares the importance of historical and transmitted knowledge”, how can the inherent, non-transmitted component alone confer a primarily Islamic character? Murata and Chittick attempt to provide an accurate survey of the character of Islam at large while also attempting to fit in systems that are supposedly equivalent at root. However, not only do they ignore the crucial role of adherence to the transmitted forms, they even seem to be unable to convincingly establish an equivalence in broad principles between the Han Kitab and its Islamic influences and sources.

III. The *Root Classic* in Chinese and Arabic

My argument against the dynamic equivalence theory with respect to Liu Zhi is supported by a critical examination of the text studied by Murata and Chittick, the *Root Classic*, a summarizing appendix to Liu’s *Nature and Principle in Islam*. Even allowing for some evidence of dynamic equivalence - which, as shown above, can at least be strongly contested - Liu’s treatise is entirely and actively devoid of any references to the distinguishing features of Islam, such as an active Creator God and the Prophet Muhammad. Instead, Liu Zhi relies on concepts and terms embedded firmly in the Three Teachings. In itself this already serves to weaken the argument that Liu’s work is Islamic in character, but it becomes especially clear when compared with the accompanying

⁶ Much of what Murata et al. hold to be direct borrowing has to do with highly specific and technical cosmological schemes. A thorough analysis of those schemes would be outside the scope of this paper, but I attempt to show that the overall purport of Liu’s work is unaffected.

⁷ Philip Yampolsky and Chu Dongwei are two such translators.

⁸ Murata et al., *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi*, 22-23.

Arabic translation from the Chinese, *The Subtleties (al-Lata'if)*, written by Nur al-Haqq.⁹ Aside from the question of external forms and labels, however, a comparison of the two texts also reveals a great disparity in fundamental meaning - for Nur al-Haqq, the universe is created by God's hand, whereas Liu Zhi illustrates a passive evolution.

The weakness of an Islamic classification of Liu Zhi becomes clear from the very beginning of the Root Classic. At the beginning of the first chapter, where Nur al-Haqq includes the *basmala*, Liu omits it. The first line of the chapter is "Glory be to Him who was a Hidden Treasure!" in the Arabic, but "How pure is the Root Suchness!" for Liu. The line is thus stripped of devotional language and of any reference to God.¹⁰ At the conclusion of this volume, Nur al-Haqq adds the following, which he apparently felt was missing from Liu's text: "And praise belongs to God, Lord of the worlds."

In the text itself, the dynamic equivalence hypothesis is first strained in lines 10-11. In Arabic, it is: "He brings to pass the Muhammadan Reality,/so, the First Engendered Being comes to be by the Command." Liu has: "The Real Principle flows and goes,/and the Mandate shows the original transformation." Several points of disparity can be observed here. Any active voice ("He brings") becomes passive ("flows and goes") in Liu's text. Where Nur al-Haqq makes explicit reference to the Muhammadan Reality, Liu refers to the Real Principle, favoring the Confucian term *li* (理, principle) over any invocation of the Prophet. Nur al-Haqq has God's Command bringing about Being. Liu uses Mandate (命, *ming*), which does not entail the existence of an active issuer. The Nur al-Haqq version has the overall character of a discrete event, whereas Liu's seems eternal and recurring.¹¹

In line 13, the distinction between "soul and intellect" referred to by Murata and Chittick is rendered with the Confucian terms *xing* (nature) and *zhi* (wisdom).

In line 14, where Nur al-Haqq refers to "branch[ing] out", Liu has "This one reality has ten thousand differentiations." In addition to the obvious resemblance to Buddhist and Daoist thought - Benite observes that it is "borrowed from Daoist philosophical discourse" - the phrase itself is distinctly Neo-Confucian¹². The Chinese is *yi shi wan fen* (一实万分), which appears in an 11th century work by Zhou Dunyi. Interestingly, it is Zhou who is credited with the development of *taiji* or Supreme Ultimate (太极), representing the undifferentiated being from which *yin* and *yang* emerge. The root meaning derives from long-established Neo-Confucian thought, not from any perceived concordance with Islam¹³.

Starkly differentiating Liu's increasingly apparent passive formulation from the active, creator-focused Arabic back-translation is the continual appearance in the latter of the

⁹ The Arabic name taken by Ma Lianyuan (1841-1895).

¹⁰ Ibid., 102-103.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Zvi Aziz Ben-Dor Benite. "Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35 (2003): 344-346.

¹³ Murata et al., *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi*, 104-105.

word *Allah*. Where the agency of God is clearly outlined by Nur al-Haqq, Liu only has (*yuan*)*sheng* “emerged” or *shengyan* “came forth”.

Another set of terms whose translation makes the idea of “equivalence” seem highly dubious is Sovereignty and Kingdom. Sovereignty first appears in line 15, where Liu Zhi has *li*, principle. In line 53, both terms appear, the former again as *li* and the latter as *qi*, vital energy. This is the first sign of a major concept for Liu which does seem to accord with the Sufi thinkers he takes as sources, namely, the differentiation between eternal Principles and their myriad worldly manifestations.

As an aside, the same connection to *taiji* and other Chinese categories is noted by Murata in her explanation of the Root Substance:

...Root Substance (benti) is used by various schools of Chinese thought to designate Ultimate Reality. In summarizing its significance, Chung-ying Cheng says that it designates the boundless source of creativity and transformation... and ‘integrates and fuses heaven, dao, taiji [the Great Ultimate], and wuji [the Non-Ultimate].’¹⁴

Following from the connection with *taiji*, *yin* and *yang* do emerge in the text, starting from line 20. The Arabic version refers to God in the active role, where again Liu Zhi represents an inexorable and organic progression with *yin* and *yang*.¹⁵

The contrast between terms with long-standing Islamic associations in the Arabic and those with strong Confucian meaning in the Chinese grows even more in the second chapter, whose title refers to “created things” (emphasis mine) in the Arabic only. In lines 5-6, Liu offers new glosses for Sovereignty and Kingdom, *xiantian* and *houtian*, both using the meaning-laden *tian*. In line 20, where the Arabic has *khatam*, Seal of the Prophets, the Chinese is *zhisheng*, or Utmost Sage.

Where Nur al-Haqq has faithfully used the Muslim terms for different classes of believers and nonbelievers, Liu uses different kinds of sage, or at least native terms that do not carry the Arabic meaning. In line 34, ‘*abid*, worshiper, is rendered *shanren*, “good person”. In line 36, ‘*asin*, disobedient, is *yongchang*, “commoners”. In the notes, Murata raises the possibility that Liu Zhi’s classification of humans is based in the nine human levels of Nasafi, but Nasafi’s classification is shown there to align only with the Nur al-Haqq version, not Liu’s original, which replaces well-established Qur’anic terms such as *khatan*, *rasul*, *wali*, and *nabi*, with different kinds of *sheng*, sage.

Perhaps most decisive, however, is a single line in the third chapter. This chapter provides an account of the development of the “spiritually living” person; line 68 details the emergence of respect for the external forms of Islam. The Arabic uses the terms *ibadah* and *adab*. *Ibadah* refers to worship, but connotes obedience and submission, sharing a trilateral root with *ubudiyah*, “slavery”. In the Qur’an, *ibadah* is used in the

¹⁴ Ibid., 199.

¹⁵ Ibid., 104-105.

following verse: “And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship me” (Q51:56). *Ibadah* then not only carries the signification of submission to God (*Islam*) but also indicates that the very purpose of humans is to submit to God, the creator. *Adab* denotes manners or courtesy.

The Chinese terms employed by Liu Zhi are *li* and *jie* respectively. *Li* has already appeared as a gloss for entirely different Arabic terms, and is discussed again below. *Jie* appears frequently in the Analects of Confucius and refers to “regulations” pertaining to people of different ranks or stations in Confucian society. It also carries diverse meanings such as “moderation” and “fidelity”, generally seeming to indicate a means of harmony with the principles (*li*) of nature. While in a very broad sense it invokes an inherited authority and perhaps a goal of union with nature, it does not carry any of the Qur’anic signification of *adab*, nor does Liu attempt to add any.

Li again appears as a gloss in line 50 of the fourth chapter, where it translates Shariah. But Shariah is not merely a metaphysical term; it refers to a specific system of moral regulation and jurisprudence based directly in the Qur’an and *hadith*. None of this is preserved or invoked by using the term *li*, which overwhelms any abstract similarity with its own rich Confucian meaning. It is already clear, then, that there is a wide disparity in meaning between the text as represented in Arabic Islamic language and the same text as represented in Chinese Neo-Confucian language.

The diagrams Liu provides to illustrate the worldview set out in the Root Classic further illustrate his metaphysical focus. Examining the diagrams corresponding to the first chapter, as numbered by Murata and Chittick, diagram 0.1 emphasizes the “undesignation of the earliest beginning”. Diagram 0.2, a “sequence of the transformation of principles”, begins with the impersonal progression of Substance → Function → Act, then proceeds to Mandate (again, 命). This provides support for the inference above that Liu Zhi does not consider the Mandate to issue from a creator. Diagram 0.3, another such sequence, begins with vital energy (气, *qi*), another distinctly non-theistic category. From there, *yin* and *yang* are introduced. Finally, I will note that the very structure of diagram 0.6 - the “circle of creation and transformation” - is significant in its departure from the Islamic world structure. The Qur’anic progression is linear: God creates all things, or, God conveys His word to the Prophets. Liu’s diagram has no beginning and no center; as is clear from the text, things arise and fall of their own accord.¹⁶ This may align closely enough with the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi and his students, but once again the root meaning cannot be definitively classified as Islamic as opposed to belonging fundamentally to the Three Teachings.

One must conclude, then, the two accounts are entirely different in their character. Liu Zhi’s account portrays the natural, unactivated progression of nature from the original undifferentiated Being, an entirely impersonal process. Nur al-Haqq refers to the active role of God as Creator, almost resembling Genesis. The two engage a similar progression

¹⁶ Ibid., 158-171.

- since, of course, Nur al-Haqq is translating Liu - but the “dynamic meaning” is hardly equivalent.

IV. Liu Zhi’s divergence in secondary literature

A survey of the secondary literature also finds broad support for at least some version of the thesis that Liu Zhi ultimately sinicizes Islamic beliefs and concepts.

I quote at length again from Murata to recapitulate the broad, metaphysical terms in which Liu’s work must be described:

*‘Real One’ knows in itself the principle of all manyness. This principle of manyness is called the ‘Numerical One’, because it gives rise to the multiplicity of the universe just as the number one gives rise to all the numbers. But the universe can only read the fullness of its possibilities through being brought back to the One from which it arose. This is the function of human beings, who, among all creatures, are uniquely qualified to be the ‘Embodied One’.*¹⁷

As laid out above, it is the lack of engagement with the differentiating elements of praxis and dogma that weakens the Islamic classification of this work.

Frankel writes that “Liu Zhi downplayed the role of revelation, rather expounding theological concepts with frequent reference to natural law.” Lee concurs: “The core teaching of the work is the multiplicity and unity of God... Liu Zhi also briefly mentioned the uniqueness of the prophet Muhammad.” Schurich provides the orthodox contrast, writing that “[Muhammad’s] importance stems from his relationship to the Qur’an”, which has “absolute centrality in Islam.”¹⁸

The issue of the treatment of Muhammad bears further investigation. In Murata’s assessment, Liu Zhi holds Muhammad to have “a pre-creation metaphysical existence.” Thus, Liu discarded the Qur’anic and early Islamic picture of Muhammad as distinctly human, even lacking divine qualities, in favor of a conception of Muhammad which is difficult to formally distinguish from that of God. Lee observes that Liu’s treatment of Muhammad in his biographical work “came close to divinizing the prophet... Liu Zhi put the prophet... at the centre of human existence”. Indeed, Wang Daiyu wrote of Muhammad that he encompassed “in unitary fashion all the realities and principles that give rise to the infinitely diverse universe. Thus the Muhammadan Reality is God”. The statement cannot be made more clearly than this.

Liu’s account of the Five Pillars similarly takes great liberties in reinterpreting the forms of Islamic belief, though a full survey of that treatise is outside the scope of this paper. “The goal of Muslims,” he wrote, “is to recover the mandate and return to the Real. Return is the

¹⁷ Lee, *Contextualization of Sufi Spirituality*, 91.

¹⁸ Schurich, “Review of Murata”.

end of the spiritual way.” Here the Han Kitab teachings break from Islam not only in its emphasis or conception of history but in its adherence to the basic tenets of Islamic practice. Liu also wrote works addressing Islamic ritual and praxis, but, as Petersen observes, “All of these works demonstrated Liu’s affinity for Neo-Confucian thought and his engagement with the three teachings of China (sanjiao 三教) - Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism”.¹⁹

Zvi Ben-Dor Benite’s assessment is that Liu Zhi’s work “has as its starting point a *filiation* in Islam but insists that Islam be viewed through the lenses of dominant Chinese cultural categories” (emphasis mine). Lee distills Benite’s study into the thesis “Chineseness is as central as Muslimness.” This is exactly synonymous with my contention that Liu is at least as close to the Three Teachings as to Islam, if not more.

Particularly interesting is an observation made by Leslie and Wassel in their examination of Liu Zhi’s sources: “Most of the texts in Arabic are standard Sunni Hanafite texts of law and ritual.” It cannot be argued, then, as Murata does in part, that the lack of distinctly Islamic characteristics in the Han Kitab results merely from its connection to Sufism; orthodox Hanafī texts are subject to the same reinterpretations. In other words, even Hanafī influence is unable to pull Liu further away from Chinese thought towards distinctly Islamic thought.²⁰

From a purely theological angle, then, the Islam developed by Liu Zhi cannot be uniquely attributed to Islam at all. However, the argument for this break can be further strengthened by an account of his probable goals, or, at least, the historical context. Lee wrote that Liu needed to be able to “claim legitimacy for Islam in Chinese culture and orthodoxy in all other religions.”²¹ He was therefore forced, or at least inclined, to weaken the formal, distinguishing Islamic elements while integrating Chinese thought to the point of compromising the original Islamic character.

It is also worth noting that, while prominent Western scholars such as Murata and Lee have argued against viewing the Han Kitab as a sinicization of Islam, the majority of Chinese scholars also believe, in Lee’s words, that “Hui Islam was sinicized by Liu Zhi’s morals.” Sha Zhongping, for instance, constructs a sophisticated view of Liu’s reinterpretation of Islam by considering the concept of the Real One. Sha sets out a two-step transformation. First, Liu translates Allah as “Real Ruler”, a “contextualization of naming”. Second, Real Ruler becomes Real One, which, crucially, is a “transformation of content”. Sha then points out the concordance between the Real One and the Neo-Confucian *li*. Reviewing this account, Lee admits, despite his support for the contextualization thesis: “The proof of sinicization of Chinese Islam is Liu Zhi’s concept of Real One that takes over the Arabic divine name Allah.”

While addressing the secondary literature in Chinese, one cannot overlook that there are also some Chinese scholars - whose opinions Lee admits are in the minority - who argue

¹⁹ Kristian Petersen, “Understanding the Sources of the Sino-Islamic Intellectual Tradition”, *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 3 (2011): 546-559.

²⁰ Lee, *Contextualization of Sufi Spirituality*, 78-79.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

that Liu Zhi did expound a uniquely Islamic philosophy. Lee gives as an example Yang Zhongdong, who argues that, despite the concordance of Liu’s teachings with *li*, Liu “clearly had a specific goal of union with the divine being”.²² However, as observed, this concept of union is very broad and universal, especially in native Chinese spirituality. Even if Liu does not fall entirely in line with Neo-Confucianism, he is still not divergent enough to require an Islamic account of his ideas.

V. Conclusion

Thus, in order to accommodate Liu Zhi as a primarily Muslim thinker, the category of Islam must be expanded to the point of being entirely uninformative from a theological standpoint. By demonstrating that the dynamic equivalence hypothesis effectively prevents differentiating Islam and Neo-Confucianism, its ultimate inconsistency is revealed. Schurich, in his review of *The Vision of Islam*, praises Murata and Chittick for “show[ing] that Islam has a profoundly consistent and coherent vision of existence.” This vision of existence is defined primarily by the Prophet Muhammad and the dogma and regulation laid down in the Qur’an and the Hadith. Though this tradition is developed further and broadened, as with Sufism and the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi, these crucial elements of Islam are still entirely replaced with Neo-Confucian terms and concepts in Liu’s writings. It seems that it is *only* in the preservation of some vaguely analogous forms, or even only in nominal self-identification, that Liu’s work comes to be considered Islamic.

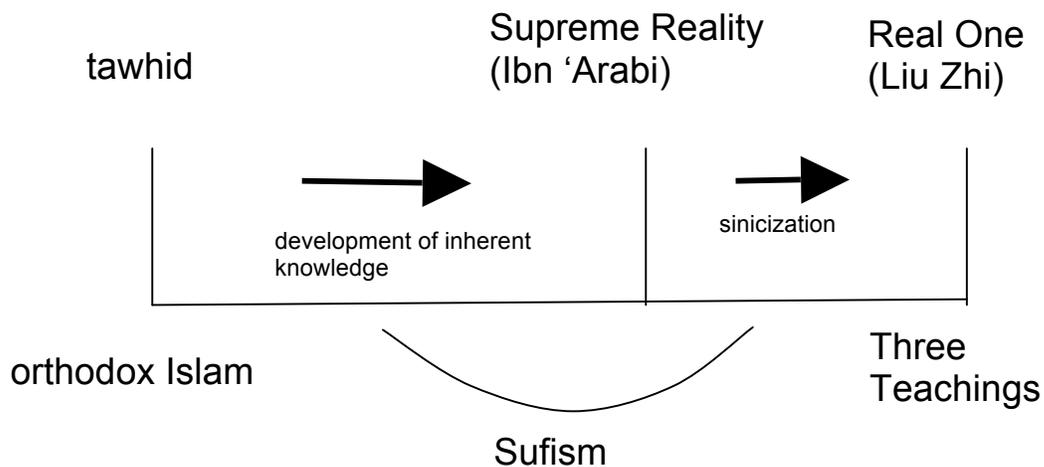


Fig. 1. A representation of the relationship between Liu Zhi’s thought and Islam.

This approach downplays the emphasis on root similarities between highly disparate systems such as Islam and Neo-Confucianism, found in the work of Murata, Lee, and others, in order to recognize them as in fact separate. When the divine is conceived on a broad level, there are of course broad similarities. However, religion is at least as much concerned with adherence to external forms and rituals as it is with “inherent meaning”. The extrinsic, culture-specific characteristics provide a system in which a believer takes

²² Ibid., 76-77.

faith, to which a follower submits, and subsequently builds family and societal ties around, resulting in a unique subjective experience that cannot be reduced to principles. The state of scholarship on Liu Zhi thus constitutes an important but unrecognized flashpoint with respect to what religion actually is.

It should be made clear that this thesis is only being defended here with respect to Liu Zhi himself, who, though the most prominent Hui scholar, is not the only one. Petersen summarizes the orientation of the Han Kitab authors thus: “*The Sage Learning* demonstrates that Liu enthusiastically adopted the essence of Neo-Confucian thought... Wang utilized its symbolism but was often unsympathetic to its inherent meaning. Ma Dexin, on the other hand, explicitly maintained the Sino-Islamic tradition of his predecessors while simultaneously pushing for greater inclusion and understanding of Arabic writing and the Qur’an.”²³ It is naturally understood that there is a mutual exchange between the global *ummah* and the Chinese Muslim community. I only argue that Liu does not engage the exchanged elements of Islam to enough of an extent to be considered adherent to it, at least uniquely.

As a further cautionary note, this argument should not be interpreted as an indictment of Chinese Islam. I have only attempted to show that the disparities between Liu Zhi and the rest of what is considered Islamic are so great as to finally break the category of Islam. It is, however, to be respected that Chinese who practice these teachings call themselves Muslims and consider Islam to be a part of their ethnic traditions. I certainly would not argue that their self-identification should be invalidated or called into question. It is only from a religious studies perspective that this distinction should be made, with the fact of Muslim identification being ascribed to Chinese historical factors rather than theological ones.

²³ Petersen, “Understanding the Sources of the Sino-Islamic Intellectual Tradition”.

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