

ISLAM IN CHINA. —Cultural Exchanges and Cultural Coexistence

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Islam enjoys its long history of more than 1300 years old since its introduction in the middle of the 7th century (around the beginning of the Tang Dynasty). The exchange between China and Arabs has a long history. It could be traced back to the period even before the rise of Islam. In either Syria or other Arabic countries, some unearthed Chinese silks ribbons, which were embroidered with Chinese characters, have proved that the trade and culture exchange between China and those Semitic groups began early in the history.

With an extensive exchange between China and other nations, especially in the heyday of the Tang and Song Dynasties, Islam was finally introduced into the Chinese territory. The new type of culture such as the theory of Unique of Allah and the religious ceremony was brought to us. Because of the effective policy of the equal importance of the three religions that had been pursued by the first Emperor of the Tang, Li Shimin, Taoism had become popular, Buddhism had flourished, and Confucianism had thrived. The tripartite balance of the three religions impelled Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism to communicate ideas with each other, forming an open-minded cultural mentality.

On the other hand, because the Islamic religion itself was not so much interested either in missionary work or biblical translations at the very beginning of the spread of its ideas, if we compare it with Buddhism, it has developed very slowly in China. It is probable that the whole Chinese society lacks understanding of Islam. Therefore Islam was simply regarded as folk custom of the Arabs.

An Islamic study over its doctrine and philosophy began in the end of the *Ming*(1368-1644A.D) and the beginning of the *Qing*(1616-1911A.D) dynasty. The research on Islam was all carried out by the Chinese Muslim scholars. They worked very hard and tried to interpret the doctrine of Islam with the traditional Chinese concepts of Confucianism and Taoism. One of the outstanding figures, *Wang Daiyu* (1570-1660), had studied particularly in the field of rationalistic sciences taught by different Chinese philosophical schools. He was honored as the one, who had comprehended deeply and thoroughly “the four studies,” the rationalistic Confucian philosophy, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam. But later on, he concentrated only on Islamic studies. He wrote several works on Islam, such as *Qingzhen* (Islam) university, the true interpretation of Islam, and the correct answers on Islam, etc.

We found that there were some inter-influences between Chinese philosophy and Islamic philosophy, when we came to see some translated works of Islamic doctrine by Chinese Muslims.

Liu Zhi, in the book of “*Tianfang Xingli*,” has generally described the origin and the evolution of the universe. It says that originally there is no name for the nature of the universe. The ultimate reality exists but is formless. At the primeval state of the universe, there emerged only “one,” the ultimate reality, regarding it as the beginning, the truth emerged and perspired. Since then, knowledge, ability, character and wisdom emerged .

In the book of “the true interpretation of Islam” of *Wang Daiyu*, the author interpreted the absoluteness of Allah in the field of ontology with the Chinese concept, “*Taiji*,” the supreme ultimate in the chapter of real law. The author said, “To say, “*Wuji* is nothing but *Taiji*, and *Taiji* is the primary source from which the two opposing principles, Yin and Yang came into being.” That means there is nothing but “one,” that is, “the primary source from which tens of thousand things emerged; and millions of things are all of one origin.” That also means there is nothing but “one.” In the field of humanity and morality, the author said, “the nature means nature as light. Allah has demonstrated the great destiny first and given it to all of us.”

He criticizes the idea held in Chinese philosophy, “destiny is nature, and nature is Tao” because it is not clear. But, what is presented in Islamic philosophy, “Allah is the absolute” presents precisely “the primary source of reason and vitality; and the origin of destiny.” In the chapter of the practice, it says, “To see oneself clearly, modesty, always follows; it is the primary source of all kinds of goodness; not to do so, is a root of all kinds of badness.” “To be modest, one will have no selfishness; and having no selfishness, one receives goodness all the time.” “To observe these carefully, one realizes gradually the fact that Allah is the primary source of himself.” “If one knows who is his Lord, he would yield to what destiny is assigned to him. To be obedient to destiny is the origin of all goodness. Not to be so, it is a root of all badness.” Therefore, there are two principles for man’s practice: to see oneself clearly, one becomes modest; to know who is one’s Lord, one begins to yield to the destiny. This is in accord with what is taught in Confucianism.

Summing up both the Islamic doctrine and the religious philosophic works, we will see the following characteristics of the Chinese Islam:

1. The philosophical thought of Chinese Islam in the Ming and Qing Dynasties shows the tendency of incorporating Confucianism into Islam and annotating Islam with Confucianism. The concepts of Confucianism were applied in the free translation of Islamic religious books. In other words, to interpret the Islamic doctrine with the Confucian terminology.
2. Applying the Confucian thought to justify the correctness of the theoretic interpretation, such as *Liu Zhi*’s “*Tianfang Dianli*.”
3. To gain a thorough understanding of the Islamic doctrine through mastery of all relevant materials of the Confucian thought in order to elaborate its true meaning and make a new and systematic Islamic ideology, such as *Liu Zhi*’s “*Tianfang Xingli*.” The Chinese translation works of the Hui nationality followed the way by combining the two ancient cultures into one and formed a brand new culture, the Chinese Hui styled Islamic philosophy. It is not only of great value to the historical development of the ideology of both Hui and the feudal Chinese society, but also constitutes an important part of Islamic culture of the world.

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