



Time, Space, and Motion in Islam  
**Islamic Cosmology in the Chinese Language**

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Little is known about the history of Islam in China, even though it is generally acknowledged that Chinese-speaking Muslims have lived there for more than a thousand years. In the several books that have been written on the topic, hardly anything has been said about how Chinese Muslims perceived their own religion before the twentieth century. However, the secondary literature does recognize that a highly significant transformation occurred in the seventeenth century. Until that time, Chinese Muslims studied and wrote about Islam in their own languages, mainly Persian. In the seventeenth century, however, Muslim scholars began to write about Islam in Chinese. They did so not for the sake of non-Muslim Chinese, but rather for the sake of other Muslims, many of whom did not have a sufficient acquaintance with the Islamic languages to master Islamic thinking—especially when faced with the vast resources of the Chinese intellectual tradition.

The early Chinese texts were written to explain to Muslims why Islam looks at the world the way it does. These are not works on Islamic practice. They do not, in other words, deal with Shari`ah and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Rather, these works explain the principles of Islam and the theoretical basis of faith and practice. The language of the texts is mainly that of the dominant intellectual school of the past thousand years of Chinese history—Neo-Confucianism. These are not apologetic works written for non-Muslims, but explanatory works written for Muslims who themselves had become intellectually assimilated into Chinese civilization.

The “Neo” in Neo-Confucianism refers to the fact that it represents a revival of Confucian teachings that began in about the tenth century after many centuries of relative neglect and strong

Islamic Cosmology in the Chinese Language rivalry from Buddhism and Taoism. Confucianism itself had been largely responsible for the shape of Chinese civilization, and the teachings of Taoism and Buddhism were formulated with Confucianism in view. Neo-Confucianism in turn assimilated many of the Taoist and Buddhist concepts into its own thinking. The exact relationship among the three traditions is much discussed by experts in Chinese intellectual history, although few disagree that Neo-Confucianism represents the full flowering of Chinese thought.

The works of the Chinese *'ulama* represent the early examples of major treatises written by Muslims in the language of one of the great, pre-existing intellectual traditions. Among these pre-existing traditions, only the Hindu, Buddhist, Greek, and Judeo-Christian civilizations could compare with the Chinese in the richness of their philosophical, theological, cosmological, and psychological teachings. However, Muslims never had to express themselves in the languages of any of those traditions. Wherever they went, they took their own languages with them—first Arabic, then Persian. Although Persia did have a pre-existing intellectual heritage, by the time Muslims began writing in Persian, the language had been totally transformed by Arabic. The other languages that were used to express Islamic learning, like Turkish and Urdu, were also in effect new creations of Islamic civilization.

What the Chinese *'ulama* did, then, was to write about Islam in a completely non-Islamic idiom. The only similar situation that had been experienced by Islamic civilization was the Muslim adoption of Greek thought during the first three or four centuries of Islam. The grand difference, however, is that the early Muslims wrote about Greek ideas in Arabic, not Greek, so they used Islamic terminology to express their views. Moreover, they did not have to worry about the response from the Greek philosophers. In contrast, the Chinese *'ulama* wrote in Chinese, so they had to use Neo-Confucian terms and expressions. Their

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books were immediately printed and distributed, so they could not ignore the possible reactions of other Chinese intellectuals.

Anyone who reads the Muslim texts with a knowledge of the Chinese intellectual ambience of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can see that they were part of the contemporary discussion and debate about the nature of the quest to become truly human. To achieve the perfection of the human condition was the goal of all three Chinese traditions—Neo-Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—and the Muslim texts can be read as a fourth voice in this conversation.

It was only in the nineteenth century that Muslims outside of China felt the need to express the teachings of their religion in the idiom of an alien civilization. By then, however, the whole Islamic world was faced with the political domination of the West. Many Muslims began writing in English and other European languages, not to explain Islam to fellow Muslims, but to defend it against attacks made by missionaries, Orientalists, and journalists. More recently, however, a large population of second and third generation Muslim immigrants have become part of the Western world. As a result, a vast literature has appeared in English and other European languages, a literature that is written by Muslims mainly for fellow Muslims who do not know any of the traditional Islamic languages. English itself is fast becoming the next Islamic language.

### **Wang Tai-yü**

The first Chinese Muslim to write about Islam in Chinese was Wang Tai-yü. He was born in the late sixteenth century and probably died in 1657 or 1658. He wrote one major book of about three hundred pages, and also a handful of short treatises. He tells us that one of his ancestors was an astronomer who had come to China from the Islamic world three hundred years before to serve the emperor, and that he himself underwent the training of a Muslim scholar in his own language, though he does not specify

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the language. He had some knowledge of written Chinese as a young man, but he did not begin serious study of the Chinese Classics until he was thirty.

Wang's major work is called *Cheng-chiao chen-ch'uan* ("The Real Commentary on the True Teaching"). It was published during Wang's lifetime in 1642, and it has been published repeatedly ever since, the latest edition being that of 1987.<sup>1</sup> In 1999, a Muslim scholar published a version of the book translated into modern Chinese.

Wang's work consists of two books of twenty chapters each. The first book focuses on theological and metaphysical issues, such as the Divine Attributes, the creation of Adam, predestination, and the nature of human perfection. The second book is more concerned with spiritual attitudes, ethics, and various issues relating to Islamic practice. *Cheng-chiao chen-ch'uan* has relatively little to say about the details of the Shari`ah. When practice is discussed, the issues are usually those that would look strange to Chinese eyes, such as the prohibition of pork, intoxicants, and gambling.

In the introduction to *Cheng-chiao chen-ch'uan*, Wang mentions that a few of his colleagues had read the book and criticized him for going too deeply into Taoist and Buddhist teachings. He replies that without borrowing his terminology from other traditions, he would not be able to explain Islam to people unfamiliar with the Islamic languages. In the text he hardly ever mentions Arabic words, and he makes no attempt to translate Islamic concepts into Chinese in any direct way. His whole effort is focused on re-expressing basic Islamic perspectives in the context of the Chinese intellectual tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Wang Tai-yu, *Chen-chiao chen-ch'uan* ("The Real Commentary on the True Teaching") Books 1&2.

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Wang has much to say about the structure of the cosmos. This should not be surprising, given that cosmology was extremely important to both Neo-Confucian thinking and the Islamic intellectual tradition. “Cosmology” here means the study of universe and the proper role of the creatures that inhabit it, most specifically human beings. Both Neo-Confucianism and Islam understood that human beings and the universe as a whole are mirror images of each other. What we find in the universe, we find within ourselves, and what we find in ourselves, we also find in the outside world.

In both the Islamic and the Neo-Confucian traditions, it was taken as self-evident that the purpose of human life is to establish harmony with the One Principle, the Supreme Reality that gave rise to the universe, a reality that in the Islamic languages is called “God.” In order to establish harmony with the Ultimate Reality, people need to live in harmony not only with other human beings, but also with the natural world. In order to live in harmony with the natural world, they need to understand both the natural world and their own selves. The only possible way to understand the world and themselves together is to understand these in terms of the First Principle. If people seek knowledge outside of their relationship with the First Principle, they are in fact engaged in a quest for ignorance. The result of such a misguided quest can be only disharmony and chaos.

In short, both Neo-Confucianism and the Islamic intellectual tradition made cosmology one of the most important issues that need to be understood if we are to live in harmony with God and our fellow human beings.

In his *Cheng-Chiao Chen-Ch'uan*, Wang often discusses the nature of the universe and the manner in which it displays the signs of God. The book is written from a theological and cosmological perspective that is both genuinely Islamic and authentically Neo-Confucian. In one of his short works, Wang

Islamic Cosmology in the Chinese Language offers a much more focused discussion of Islamic theological principles. He calls this treatise “The Great Learning of the Pure and Real” (*Ch’ing-chen ta-hsüeh*). “The Pure and Real” is a name that the Chinese Muslims gave to the Islamic tradition. “The Great Learning” is a short Confucian classic that played a central role in Neo-Confucian teachings. So, the very title of the book tells us that Wang is explaining the most essential teachings of Islam in Neo-Confucian language. The title might also be translated as “The Essential Principles of Islam.”

It should not be surprising that in “The Great Learning,” Wang considers the most basic teaching of Islam to be the assertion of unity, that is, *tawhîd*, which is the basis of all Islamic teachings. Although the book is relatively short, the text is both condensed and highly technical, so I cannot go into details here. For those of you who are interested, I have translated the whole text in my book on Islamic thinking in Chinese.<sup>2</sup> Here, I will summarize the contents very briefly. The fact that the text is short and focuses on *tawhîd* allows us to see quite clearly what was of primary interest to the Muslims of China, as also to the Neo-Confucians.

The book has three central chapters, and these deal individually with three basic issues of *tawhîd*. Wang Tai-yü calls these issues “the three ones.” His basic argument is first, that God is one. Second, the universe as a whole is one according to its supreme principle, which is God. And third, human beings must undertake the task of becoming one with God by observing the teachings and practices of Islam.

Wang calls the first of the three ones the “Real One.” By it he means God in himself, in his utter transcendence, or what is commonly called in Islamic texts *dhât*, the “Essence.” Wang explains that all of reality is present in the Real One. This absolute

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<sup>2</sup> Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).

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reality of God can be viewed from three basic standpoints, which he calls the “root nature,” the “root allotment,” and the “root act.” Although the discussion of these three roots is similar to the analyses of the different sorts of Divine Attributes by Muslim theologians, the terminology is drawn from the Neo-Confucian vocabulary.

Wang calls the second one the “Numerical One.” By it he means the creative divine word that gives rise to the universe. It is the one word of God that is the principle of both the cosmos and the human being. It is also the internal reality of the “Utmost Sage,” who of course is Muhammad. In Chinese, the word “sage” used alone refers to Confucius, so the expression “Utmost Sage” implicitly acknowledges that Confucius was a prophet, and it explicitly asserts that Muhammad was the greatest of the prophets.

The name of the third one is the “Embodied One.” Here, on one of the few occasions in the text, Wang uses Arabic words to explain that there are three levels of human perfection. He calls the first level of perfection *tawhîd*, a word that he translates as “attaining one from ten thousand.” In other words, by reading the signs of God in the universe, in themselves, and in the scriptures, human beings can come to perceive the One, who is the origin and source of “the ten thousand things.” The expression “ten thousand things” is the Chinese designation for all the creatures of the universe.

Wang describes, the second level of achieving human perfection with the Arabic word *ittihâd* or “unification.” He explains that *ittihâd* means “attaining one from two.” It is when the illusion of duality between Lord and servant is overcome to a certain degree. Wang says that it is like a stage of intoxication, because the seeker is not able to discern himself from the One Reality that he is seeking.



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The third level of achieving human perfection is *wahdah* or “unity.” Wang has said that *tawhîd* means “attaining one from many” and *ittihâd* is “attaining one from two.” Now he says that *wahdah* is “attaining one from one.” It is the final stage of the path to God, in which God’s signs become manifest to the perfect human being without any ego-centeredness. In Sufi language, this seems to be the stage of *baqa’ ba`d al-fana’*, “subsistence after annihilation,” which is referred to in the Qur’anic verse: “All that lives on earth or in the heavens is bound to pass away: but forever will abide your Lord, full of Majesty and Glory” (55:26-27).

To give an idea of Wang Tai-yü’s style and language, let me quote part of his description of the seeker of God, who achieves the final stage of human perfection, that of *wahdah*:

When you reach this ultimate level, you will be neither the same nor separable. At this level, nothing at all is independent and everything is with the Lord, and this is “unity in union.” This is because the inward and outward of after-heaven combine in essence, and the origin of before-heaven is uniquely disclosed. The wind will be calm and the water placid, the sun high and the clouds scattered. Although you have form and spirit, yet their movement and quietude is one. You can witness the Real Lord only with a pure and clean no-self, and this is with mutual continuity and undifferentiated togetherness. . . . The Utmost Sage said, “I am with the Real Lord and recognize the Real Lord with the body. If it were not by means of the Real Lord, it would be impossible to recognize the Real Lord.”

### Liu Chih

After this brief discussion of Wang Tai-yü, let me now turn to a second great Muslim scholar. If any of the Chinese ‘*ulama*’ surpassed Wang in influence on Chinese-language Islam, this would be Liu Chih, who was born around 1670, a dozen years after

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Wang's death. He wrote the culminating work of his career in 1724, though it is not known when he died. He tells us that his father was a scholar who deeply felt the lack of Islamic materials in Chinese. After a preliminary Islamic education, Liu Chih began to study the Chinese classics at the age of 15, then devoted six years to Arabic and Islamic literature, three years to Buddhism, and one year to Taoism. He turned his efforts toward making Islamic learning available in Chinese from the age of 33, that is, around the year 1700. He says that he wrote several hundred manuscripts, although he published only 10 percent of them.

Liu Chih completed his first major work in 1704. He called it *T'ien-fang hsing-li*, a title that has usually been translated as "The Philosophy of Arabia." *T'ien-fang* means literally "the direction of heaven." The expression is used for both Makkah and Arabia. *Hsing-li* means literally "nature and principle." However, it is a technical term that designates Neo-Confucianism, which is typically called "the school of nature and principle" (*hsing-li hsüeh*). Hence, the literal meaning of the title is "The Nature and Principle of the Direction of Heaven." It is not going too far to suggest that a better translation would be "The Neo-Confucianism of Makkah," or simply "Islamic Neo-Confucianism."<sup>3</sup>

Liu Chih's "Islamic Neo-Confucianism" is divided into six books. The first is called *Pen-ching*, "the root classic." It sets down the main principles of Islamic cosmology in five chapters, for a total of about 2,000 characters. The five chapters are followed by ten diagrams, which illustrate the metaphysical and cosmological relationships described in the chapters. Each of the five remaining books explains one of the five chapters in detail, and each employs twelve more diagrams to do so. The resulting seventy diagrams are reminiscent of those found in Arabic and Persian works on cosmology from about the eighth century and fourteenth century respectively. They are also similar to the

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<sup>3</sup> Liu Chih, *T'ien-fang hsing-li*.

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cosmological diagrams that were commonly used in Neo-Confucian texts.

Liu Chih's "Islamic Neo-Confucianism" was widely read down into the twentieth century. We know this because it was republished twenty-five times between 1760 and 1939. It was probably the most influential book among Chinese Muslim intellectuals during this period. Like Wang Tai-yü's "Great Learning of the Pure and Real", the book is about God, the universe, and the human soul. This fact tells us that the Chinese *'ulama*, like Muslim intellectuals everywhere, considered knowledge of metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology essential to the quest for human perfection. If we do not understand God, the universe, and ourselves, we will not be able to live a proper life in the world. If we are to have a valid sense of reality, we need to understand that all of reality is rooted in the First Principle, which is God. A false knowledge of things will lead to a loss of the sense of *tawhîd* and an assertion of the independent, self-sufficient reality of things. It will allow us to treat things as objects, as if they were not creatures of God, and as if they did not have lessons to teach us about God and our own souls.

A brief summary of the contents of the first book of Liu Chih's "Islamic Neo-Confucianism" can help provide a sense of the theoretical issues that occupied the minds of Chinese Muslims. In my summary, I am using the standard English translations of the Chinese words. Although much could be said about the Arabic terminology that Liu Chih may have had in mind, this is not the place to do so. Instead, I want simply to illustrate how an Islamic text on cosmology can sound very Chinese. At the same time, however, anyone familiar with the Islamic intellectual tradition will recognize many ideas.

Chapter One deals with the beginning of creation and transformation. The "beginningless beginning" is the origin of the ten thousand things. This is the Real Essence, which is the root

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nature of creation and transformation. It is the Real Being, the uniquely One, and the Real Principle. Its knowledge and power pervade its root nature and then become manifest as the inward and the outward of the subtle function. As the subtle function starts to move, yang becomes separate from yin, and this brings about the manifestation of water and fire. Fire appears outwardly along with air, and then heaven and the stars become manifest. Water piles up inwardly along with earth, and then earth and the oceans come into existence. Next the four elements bring forth the ten thousand things. The last of the ten thousand things to appear is the human being.

Chapter Two is dedicated to the individual activities of the ten thousand beings. The Real One overflows and transforms, and this results in the appearance of principle along with images. The principle is possessed by the Real's knowledge, and the images are seen because of the Real's power. So, knowledge and power are the twin principles according to which God governs the universe. Knowledge pertains to the domain of "before-heaven," which is the spiritual realm; power spreads in the domain of "after-heaven," which is the earthly realm. Knowledge and power become manifest in a great variety of human types, including four degrees of sagehood and various lesser degrees such as those of worthies, men of knowledge, modest servants, and good people. So also they appear in the various levels of creatures, including animals, plants, inanimate things, the nine heavens, the four elements, and the seasons.

Chapter Three describes how human nature comes to be manifest. All the qualities and characteristics of the created things appear in human beings gradually, beginning month by month in the womb. Little by little human beings manifest all of the properties of heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things, until finally, by means of spiritual growth and development, people are able to reach the stage of perfection.

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Chapter Four explains the seven virtues that are innately present in the human heart. Once these virtues are actualized, they make the heart spiritual and clear. The virtues are obedience, faithfulness, kindness, clear discernment, sincere reality, issuing concealment, and real appearance. The last of these is the first heart, or the primordial human heart that gave birth to all the levels of the creation and the descending arc of manifestation. The human task is to traverse the ascending arc that goes back to God. By climbing back to God, people can return to the real heart. Then, they will have completed the circle of creation and transformation, and they will achieve the perfect form of human fullness, which is the state of the Human Ultimate.

Chapter Five sums up the whole discussion by explaining how everything described in the first four chapters returns by means of human beings to the One Reality of God.

The rest of “Islamic Neo-Confucianism” employs the seventy diagrams to explain in great detail the meaning of all the statements made in the first book. Throughout the text, the underlying theme is *tawhîd*. In other words, the book illustrates how all things come from God, how they continue to develop and transform under the control of God, and how they eventually return to God after leaving the visible universe.

In “Islamic Neo-Confucianism,” Liu Chih does not include any specific discussion of time and space as we understand the terms. I think the basic reason for this is that in modern thought, “time and space” have come to have a kind of independent status. After all, in modern thinking, there is no Supreme Principle, so time and space take on the color of relatively supreme principles. However, in both Neo-Confucian and Islamic thought, there is too much stress on the Supreme Principle, the Ultimate Tao, for any independent status to be given to anything in the world. Time and space, to the extent that they are discussed, can only be the modalities in which the Principle makes itself manifest. Since the

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Principle is one and the world is many, the Principle can only display its characteristics in manyness, and time and space are words that we use to represent two basic dimensions of manyness.

One kind of manyness is simultaneous. It is the indefinite expanse of the universe throughout space, and the Chinese call it “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things.” The other kind of manyness is the successive manifestation of one thing after another. This is what the Chinese call “change.” Change is an important topic in Chinese thought and it is the title of the famous classic, the *I Ching*, or “Book of Changes.” Change is a necessary concomitant of the Tao, because the One can only show its infinite possibility by unfolding successively. This ancient Chinese idea of change can of course be compared with many theological discussions of change in Islamic thought, ranging from Ash`arite atomism, to Ibn al-`Arabi’s renewal of creation at each instant, to Mulla Sadra’s idea of substantial movement.

Let me conclude by saying that both Wang Tai-yü’s “Great Learning of the Pure and Real” and Liu Chih’s “Islamic Neo-Confucianism” illustrate very clearly the basic concern of Muslim intellectuals of pre-modern times. This concern was to establish harmony with God, equilibrium with heaven and earth, and on the basis of harmony with God and equilibrium with the universe, to achieve peace within society. Although social issues were important, the Muslim intellectuals knew that if society was to be healthy, it had to be built on a correct vision of reality. Any correct vision of reality will take God as the first principle, and it will also recognize the sacred character of the whole universe. It will understand that in order to live in harmony with God, people need to live in harmony with God’s creation, and in order to live in harmony with God’s Creation, they must live in harmony with their own selves and their own hearts. Wang explains these points near the beginning of his “Great Learning.” Let me quote his words as my final remark:

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If the country is not governed, it is because the family is not regulated. If the family is not regulated, it is because the body is not cultivated. If the body is not cultivated, it is because the words are not one. If the words are not one, it is because the intention is not sincere. If the intention is not sincere, it is because the heart is not true. If the heart is not true, it is because the self is not known. If the self is not known, it is because knowledge is not real. If knowledge is not real, it is because clear virtue has not been clarified. If clear virtue is not clarified, it is because the fountainhead of clear virtue is not known. If the fountainhead of clear virtue is not known, it is because the Real One is not discriminated from the Numerical One. If the Real One is not discriminated from the Numerical One, it is because the principle of the utmost greatness of the Lord and the [Chief] Servant has not become clear. When the principle of the utmost greatness of the Lord and the Servant has not become clear, ten thousand good deeds may be done, but they are not worthy of mention. Why? When the taproot of the deed is not pure, its branches and twigs cannot be pure.