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# TRANSLATING ISLAM INTO CHINESE THOUGHT: THE HAN KITAB AS AN INTELLECTUAL PROJECT IN IMPERIAL CHINA

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**Abstract:** *Islam has a long history in China, yet its intellectual development has often been overshadowed by studies emphasizing politics, ethnicity, and state–religion relations. This article examines the Han Kitab tradition as a distinctive intellectual project through which Muslim scholars in imperial China translated Islamic concepts into the philosophical language of Confucian thought. Rather than treating the Han Kitab as a marginal form of cultural accommodation or religious syncretism, the article argues that it represented a deliberate and systematic effort to articulate Islam within the dominant moral and epistemic framework of Chinese civilization. Focusing on the writings of Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi, the study analyzes how central Islamic concepts, particularly divine unity (tawḥīd), religious norms (sharīʿa), and moral character (akhlāq), were rearticulated through Confucian categories such as Tian (Heaven), Li (ritual propriety), and Ren (humaneness). Employing a qualitative, literature-based approach, the article draws on leading scholarship on Islam in China to interpret the conceptual strategies developed in major Han Kitab texts. The findings show that translation in the Han Kitab tradition functioned as a form of conceptual mediation rather than theological compromise, by foregrounding ethics, ritual discipline, and moral cultivation, Han Kitab scholars presented Islam as a coherent intellectual and moral tradition capable of participating in the ethical discourse of imperial China. The study contributes to broader discussions of Islamic intellectual history by demonstrating how claims to religious universality have been sustained through translation, interpretation, and engagement with distinct civilizational vocabularies.*
**Keywords:** *Han, Islam, Confucianism, Religious, China, Tiongkok*

## Introduction

Islam has long been present in China, yet its historical trajectory cannot be adequately understood through the familiar lenses of conquest, imperial expansion, or forced conversion that dominate narratives of Islam in many other regions. Instead, the encounter between Islam and Chinese civilization unfolded largely through trade, cultural exchange, and

intellectual negotiation. From as early as the Tang and Song dynasties, Muslim communities had already established themselves within the social fabric of Chinese society, gradually developing distinctive modes of religious life shaped by local conditions and intellectual traditions.[1] In this context, Islam in China emerged not merely as a transplanted faith, but as a tradition compelled to articulate itself within a vastly different cosmological, linguistic, and philosophical environment.

Among the most significant outcomes of this encounter was the emergence of what modern scholarship refers to as the *Han Kitab* tradition. The term denotes a corpus of Islamic texts written in classical Chinese by Muslim scholars, primarily during the Ming and Qing periods, which sought to explain Islamic theology, ethics, and ritual practices using concepts drawn from Confucian thought.[2] Rather than relying on Arabic or Persian as authoritative languages of Islamic learning, these scholars deliberately chose Chinese as their medium, addressing both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences within the intellectual conventions of the Chinese literati. This decision reflected a conscious intellectual strategy: Islam was to be presented not as a foreign creed, but as a coherent moral and metaphysical system compatible with the ethical foundations of Chinese civilization. Existing studies on Islam in China have tended to emphasize political control, ethnic identity, or state–religion relations, especially in contemporary contexts.[3] While such perspectives are undoubtedly important, they often overshadow the rich intellectual history that shaped Muslim self-understanding in China long before the rise of the modern nation-state. The Han Kitab tradition, in particular, is frequently treated as a peripheral curiosity or as evidence of cultural syncretism, rather than as a serious intellectual project grounded in rigorous theological and

[1] Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), pp. 23–45.

[2] Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 67–89.

[3] Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 3–15.

philosophical reflection.[4] This tendency risks underestimating the agency of Muslim scholars who actively engaged with Confucian categories not out of theological compromise, but as a means of translating Islamic universalism into a locally intelligible form.

The scholars associated with the Han Kitab—most notably Wang Daiyu (王岱舆) and Liu Zhi (刘智)—were deeply conversant with both Islamic learning and Confucian classics. Their works demonstrate a sophisticated effort to reinterpret core Islamic concepts such as *tawḥīd*, prophecy, ritual law, and moral cultivation through the vocabulary of *Tian* (Heaven), *Li* (ritual propriety), and *Ren* (humaneness).[5] This process was neither superficial nor merely linguistic. It involved a reconfiguration of Islamic discourse in which metaphysical principles and ethical norms were framed within the dominant intellectual grammar of Chinese thought. In doing so, Han Kitab scholars positioned Islam as a moral philosophy capable of contributing to social harmony and personal cultivation, values highly esteemed within Confucian orthodoxy.

This article argues that the Han Kitab tradition should be understood as an intellectual project aimed at translating Islam into Chinese thought, rather than as an exercise in religious accommodation or passive assimilation. Translation here is not conceived simply as the conversion of terms from one language to another, but as a deeper process of conceptual mediation that allows religious ideas to operate meaningfully within a new epistemic framework.[6] By situating Islamic teachings within Confucian metaphysics and ethics, Han Kitab scholars participated in a broader pattern of Islamic intellectual history in which inherited religious commitments were articulated through philosophical vocabularies developed in other cultural settings. A cautious comparison may be drawn

[4] James D. Frankel, "Islamic Learning in China: The Han Kitab Tradition," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 22, no. 1 (2011): 9–12.

[5] Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 45–72.

[6] Talal Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 141–164.

with the Graeco-Arabic translation movement of the Abbasid period, when Muslim scholars translated, selected, and reworked Greek philosophical materials within an Arabic-Islamic intellectual environment. The two cases were neither institutionally nor historically identical: the Abbasid translation movement developed through large-scale scholarly networks supported by imperial institutions, whereas Han Kitab authors worked within Chinese-speaking Muslim communities seeking intellectual recognition in a Confucian society. Nevertheless, both cases demonstrate that intellectual translation involved more than linguistic transfer. It required the critical appropriation of established conceptual languages so that Islamic claims could be expressed, debated, and reformulated within a different epistemic order.. The case of the Han Kitab demonstrates that Islam's engagement with non-Islamic civilizations has often been mediated through scholarly interpretation and ethical reasoning rather than coercion or confrontation.[7] Such an approach not only enriches our understanding of Islam in China, but also challenges reductive assumptions about religious identity as inherently static or oppositional.

The central question guiding this study is therefore: how did Han Kitab scholars translate Islamic concepts into the language and philosophical categories of Chinese thought, and what does this process reveal about Islam as an intellectual tradition in a non-Islamic civilizational context? To address this question, the article adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach, examining classical Han Kitab texts through authoritative secondary scholarship. Rather than attempting to reconstruct social practices or political conditions, the focus remains on ideas, concepts, and modes of reasoning as articulated in textual form. By revisiting the Han Kitab as an intellectual enterprise, this article aims to reposition Muslim scholars of imperial China as active participants in the global history of Islamic thought. Their works testify to a mode of Islamic

[7] Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ʿAbbasid Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1–10; Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 57–61

reasoning that is both faithful to core theological commitments and responsive to local intellectual traditions. In doing so, the Han Kitab tradition offers a valuable perspective on how Islam has historically negotiated cultural difference—not through erasure or resistance, but through translation, interpretation, and intellectual engagement.

**Method**

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based research approach to examine the Han Kitab tradition as an intellectual project within the historical context of imperial China. Rather than focusing on contemporary social practices or political developments, the research is concerned with the analysis of ideas, concepts, and modes of reasoning as articulated in classical texts and interpreted through modern scholarship. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for the study of intellectual history, where texts function not merely as sources of information but as primary sites of meaning-making and theoretical reflection.[8] The primary materials of this study consist of classical Han Kitab writings produced by Muslim scholars during the Ming and Qing dynasties, most notably the works of Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi. Given the linguistic and historical complexity of these texts, the study does not rely on direct philological analysis of original manuscripts. Instead, it draws upon authoritative secondary interpretations that have contextualized, translated, and analyzed these works within the broader framework of Chinese intellectual history and Islamic thought.[9] This strategy allows the study to engage critically with Han Kitab texts while maintaining methodological rigor and feasibility.

Secondary sources constitute the principal analytical foundation of this study. The research draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and edited volumes on Islam in China, Confucian–Islamic intellectual exchange, and the intellectual history of Muslim

[8] Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53.

[9] Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 12–18.

communities in East Asia. Particular attention is given to scholarship that examines the Han Kitab as an intellectual tradition. Studies by Zvi Ben-Dor Benite provide the broader historical context of Muslim intellectual life in late imperial China, while James D. Frankel's analyses inform the discussion of Liu Zhi's engagement with Confucian philosophy and Islamic theology. Sachiko Murata's work offers insight into the metaphysical dimensions of Han Kitab writings, complemented by Jonathan N. Lipman's historical account of Muslim communities in China. These studies provide the principal interpretive framework through which the Han Kitab is analyzed in this article.[10] By prioritizing well-established scholarly sources, the study ensures analytical depth and minimizes reliance on speculative or anecdotal interpretations. The analytical method adopted in this research is primarily conceptual and interpretive. Drawing on hermeneutic approaches commonly employed in intellectual history, the study examines how key Islamic concepts—such as divine unity توحيد/*tawḥīd*, moral cultivation, and religious law—are rearticulated through Confucian categories including 天/tiān (Heaven), 礼/lǐ (ritual propriety), and 仁/rén (humaneness).[11] This analysis does not seek to evaluate the theological correctness of these interpretations but rather to understand the intellectual logic and strategic reasoning that underpinned their formulation.

To maintain analytical clarity, the study proceeds through a thematic reading of the literature rather than a chronological reconstruction of events. Themes such as translation, ethical compatibility, and intellectual mediation serve as organizing principles for the analysis. This thematic focus enables the study to highlight patterns of reasoning shared across different Han Kitab texts while also acknowledging variations in emphasis among individual scholars.[12] Such an approach is

[10] Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad*; Frankel, *Rectifying God's Name*; Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*; Lipman, *Familiar Strangers*.

[11] Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 33–41.

[12] Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), pp. 52–60.

consistent with the study's aim of examining Han Kitab as an intellectual strategy rather than as a homogeneous or static tradition. It is important to note the deliberate limitations of this research design. The study does not address contemporary manifestations of Islam in China, nor does it engage in ethnographic observation or interviews with present-day Muslim communities. These dimensions, while significant in their own right, fall outside the scope of an inquiry centered on historical intellectual production. By clearly delimiting its focus, the study avoids methodological overreach and remains grounded in its chosen analytical framework. [13] The use of secondary sources is not treated as a methodological weakness but as an appropriate scholarly choice given the nature of the research question. Intellectual traditions such as the Han Kitab are best approached through sustained engagement with texts and their interpretations, rather than through empirical generalization. In this sense, the study aligns with established practices in the humanities, where rigorous literature-based research constitutes a legitimate and respected mode of knowledge production.[14]

**Historical Background of Han Kitab Tradition**

The emergence of the Han Kitab tradition cannot be separated from the broader historical presence of Islam in China, which predates the Ming dynasty by several centuries. Muslim merchants and envoys had already arrived in China during the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) periods, primarily through maritime trade routes and the overland Silk Road.[15] These early contacts facilitated the gradual formation of Muslim communities who, over time, developed localized forms of religious practice while remaining connected—albeit loosely—to the wider Islamic world. By the time of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Islam had become a recognizable, though minority, component of Chinese society.

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[13] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 89–92.

[14] Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 21–25.

[15] Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), pp. 19–32.

A significant transformation occurred during the Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, when Muslim scholars increasingly turned toward Chinese as the primary medium for religious expression. This shift was not merely linguistic but deeply intellectual. Although Islam had long been connected to China through commercial and scholarly exchanges across Central Asia and the Indian Ocean, these transregional intellectual networks became less accessible during the Ming period. The decline was influenced by changing maritime policies, reduced mobility of foreign scholars, and the increasing localization of Muslim communities in China. As direct access to Arabic and Persian scholarship became more limited, Chinese-speaking Muslim scholars increasingly relied on Chinese as the primary medium for preserving, interpreting, and transmitting Islamic knowledge.[16] In response, Muslim scholars sought to articulate Islamic teachings through the conceptual resources of Chinese thought, particularly Confucian philosophy, which dominated the intellectual life of imperial China. It was within this historical context that the Han Kitab (汉文经籍, *Hànwén jīngjí*) tradition took shape. The term refers to a body of Islamic texts written in classical Chinese that aimed to explain Islamic theology, ethics, and ritual practice using Confucian terminology and modes of reasoning.[17] The choice of the word *Kitab*—derived from Arabic *kitāb* (كتاب)—alongside *Han*, signifying Chinese language and culture, reflects a deliberate synthesis: Islam was presented not as an alien system but as a universal moral teaching compatible with Chinese civilization. The social position of Muslims during the Ming and Qing periods further shaped this intellectual endeavor. Many Han Kitab scholars emerged from Chinese-speaking Muslim communities that were later identified as Hui. However, the meaning and boundaries of Hui identity evolved over time and should not be understood as a fixed social category throughout the

[16] Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 21–29.

[17] James D. Frankel, *Rectifying God's Name: Liu Zhi's Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), pp. 14–18.

Ming and Qing periods.[18] Unlike later periods marked by ethnic and political tensions, Hui Muslims during the imperial era were often integrated into local society, participating in commerce, education, and even state administration. This relative integration encouraged Muslim intellectuals to frame Islam in ways that resonated with Confucian ideals of social harmony, moral cultivation, and loyalty to the state.

Confucianism, particularly its Neo-Confucian form, provided the dominant epistemological framework through which knowledge was evaluated and legitimized in imperial China. Concepts such as *Tian* (天, *tiān*, Heaven), *Li* (礼, *lǐ*, ritual propriety), and *Ren* (仁, *rén*, humaneness) constituted the moral vocabulary of the educated elite.[19] For Muslim scholars seeking intellectual recognition, engaging with this vocabulary was not optional but necessary. As a result, Han Kitab writings frequently reinterpret Islamic metaphysical principles—especially *tawḥīd* (توحيد)—through the lens of *Tian*, presenting divine unity as consistent with the Confucian understanding of cosmic order. The intellectual ambition of the Han Kitab tradition becomes particularly evident when compared with earlier phases of Islamic accommodation in China. Prior to the Ming period, Islamic practice was often maintained through communal rituals and localized customs, with limited systematic engagement with Chinese philosophy.[20] The Han Kitab marked a shift toward textualization and theoretical reflection, mirroring, in some respects, earlier moments in Islamic history when Muslim scholars encountered Greek philosophy and developed sophisticated traditions of translation and commentary. In both cases, translation functioned not merely as linguistic conversion but as epistemic mediation.

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[18] Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 6–9.

[19] Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 28–35.

[20] Jonathan Lipman, "Islamic Communities in China," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic History*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 635–638.

Key figures such as Wang Daiyu (王岱舆, ca. 1570–1660) and Liu Zhi (刘智, 1660–1739) exemplify this intellectual transformation. Wang Daiyu's works sought to establish the metaphysical foundations of Islam using Confucian cosmology, emphasizing moral self-cultivation and the unity of Heaven and humanity. Liu Zhi, building upon this foundation, produced a more systematic articulation of Islamic ritual, law, and ethics, framed explicitly within Confucian categories. [21] Their writings demonstrate a conscious effort to position Islam as a tradition of ethical refinement (*akhlāq*, أخلاق) rather than a legalistic or dogmatic system. Importantly, the Han Kitab tradition should not be understood as a marginal or isolated phenomenon. These texts circulated among educated Muslim communities and were often intended for a broader Chinese readership, including Confucian scholars curious about Islam. [22] By adopting the literary conventions and moral concerns of the Confucian canon, Han Kitab authors sought to legitimize Islam within the intellectual hierarchy of imperial China. In doing so, they challenged the assumption that religious truth must be bound to a single linguistic or cultural form.

The decline of the imperial system and the advent of modernity eventually altered the conditions that had made the Han Kitab possible. The rise of nationalism, new educational institutions, and shifting state policies toward religion reshaped Muslim intellectual life in China.[9] Nevertheless, the Han Kitab remains a crucial historical example of how Islam has been articulated outside the Arabic–Persian ecumene through sustained intellectual engagement rather than coercive assimilation or passive adaptation. By situating the Han Kitab within its historical context, this section underscores the conditions that enabled its emergence as a coherent intellectual tradition. The Han Kitab was not an accidental by product of cultural proximity but a deliberate scholarly response to the epistemic demands of imperial Chinese society. Understanding this

[21] James D. Frankel, "Making Islam Chinese: The Han Kitab Tradition," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2010): 1–5.

[22] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 72–75.

background is essential for appreciating the deeper conceptual work undertaken by Han Kitab scholars in translating Islam into Chinese thought.

**Key Figures of the Han Kitab**

The intellectual coherence of the Han Kitab tradition is best understood through the works of its principal figures, whose writings exemplify sustained efforts to articulate Islam within the conceptual framework of Chinese thought. Among these scholars, Wang Daiyu (王岱舆, ca. 1570–1660) and Liu Zhi (刘智, 1660–1739) occupy a central position. Their texts do not merely translate Islamic doctrines into Chinese language, but reformulate them in ways that resonate with Confucian metaphysics, ethics, and modes of moral reasoning.

Wang Daiyu is widely regarded as one of the earliest and most influential figures of the Han Kitab tradition. Living during the late Ming period, Wang was deeply familiar with both Islamic learning and the Confucian intellectual canon. His most notable work, *Zhengjiao Zhenquan* (正教真诠, *The True Explanation of the Correct Teaching*), represents an ambitious attempt to establish the metaphysical foundations of Islam using Chinese philosophical categories.[23] In Wang's writings, the Islamic principle of *tawḥīd* (توحيد) occupies a central position. Rather than presenting divine unity through Arabic theological discourse, Wang interprets *tawḥīd* through the Confucian concept of *Tian* (天 Heaven), understood as the ultimate source of cosmic order and moral coherence. By doing so, Wang frames Islam as a doctrine that affirms the unity of Heaven and the harmony of the cosmos, a theme deeply familiar to Confucian scholars.[24] This approach enables Wang to reinterpret familiar Confucian concepts without compromising the central Islamic doctrine of divine unity. Drawing on Confucian ideals of moral self-cultivation, Wang

[23] Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 90–97.

[24] James D. Frankel, *Rectifying God's Name: Liu Zhi's Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), pp. 22–29.

emphasizes the refinement of character and the alignment of human conduct with cosmic principles. Islamic moral teachings are thus presented not as external commandments but as pathways toward personal and social harmony. In this sense, Wang's use of Tian does not identify God with the natural or cosmic order; it redirects a familiar Chinese term toward a stricter monotheistic meaning.[25] This metaphysical distinction also shapes Wang's account of human conduct. Because the cosmos derives its order from the Creator, moral discipline is understood as a human response to a divinely grounded order rather than merely conformity to social convention. Self-restraint, sincerity, and proper relations with others therefore acquire a theological significance: they become expressions of recognition of the Creator and of humanity's dependent position within creation.

While Wang Daiyu laid the metaphysical groundwork of the Han Kitab tradition, Liu Zhi represents its most systematic and mature expression. Active during the early Qing period, Liu Zhi produced a comprehensive body of work that addressed Islamic theology, ritual practice, and moral philosophy in a highly structured manner. His major texts include *Tianfang Xingli* (天方性理, *Nature and Principle in Islam*) and *Tianfang Dianli* (天方典礼, *Rituals of Islam*).[26] In *Tianfang Xingli* (天方性理, *Nature and Principle in Islam*), Liu Zhi develops a systematic account of Islamic cosmology, human nature, and the relationship between the Creator and creation using conceptual categories familiar to Neo-Confucian philosophy. Rather than presenting Islamic theology as a foreign system of belief, he explains it through discussions of principle (li 理), nature (xing 性), and moral cultivation, allowing educated Chinese readers to approach Islamic metaphysics within an established philosophical framework. Liu Zhi's intellectual contribution lies in his ability to integrate Islamic law and ritual into Confucian ethical discourse.

[25] Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 74–81.

[26] Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), pp. 66–69.

Concepts related to *sharīʿa* (شريعة) are interpreted through the lens of *Li* (礼, ritual propriety), a central Confucian category governing proper conduct and social order. By framing Islamic rituals as expressions of moral discipline and social harmony, Liu presents religious practice as an extension of ethical cultivation rather than as rigid legal obligation.[27] Moreover, Liu Zhi places significant emphasis on *akhlāq* (أخلاق), or moral character, as the core of religious life. He argues that ritual observance without ethical refinement is incomplete, echoing Confucian critiques of empty formalism. This emphasis reinforces the portrayal of Islam as a tradition concerned primarily with moral excellence, aligning it with Confucian ideals of *Ren* (仁, humaneness) and virtuous conduct.[28] His later work, *Tianfang Dianli* (天方典礼, *Rituals of Islam*), shifts the discussion from metaphysical principles to religious practice. Here Liu explains prayer, fasting, charity, dietary regulations, and other Islamic obligations not merely as legal prescriptions, but as disciplined forms of ritual practice that cultivate virtue, regulate human conduct, and strengthen social harmony. These two works demonstrate Liu Zhi's broader intellectual project of presenting Islam as a coherent system in which theology, ritual, and ethics mutually reinforce one another rather than existing as separate dimensions of religious life.

Both Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi wrote with a clear awareness of their intended audience. Their works were not limited to Muslim communities but were also accessible to educated Confucian readers curious about Islam. The use of classical Chinese literary style and philosophical terminology reflects an intentional strategy to situate Islam within the intellectual hierarchy of imperial China.[29] In this respect, Han Kitab texts functioned as mediating works, seeking recognition for Islam as a legitimate moral and philosophical system rather than a marginal

[27] James D. Frankel, *Rectifying God's Name*, pp. 14–18.

[28] James D. Frankel, "Islamic Learning in China: The Han Kitab Tradition," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 22, no. 1 (2011): 14–18.

[29] Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 10–12.

religious identity. It is important to note that the intellectual strategies employed by Han Kitab scholars did not entail the abandonment of core Islamic principles. Instead, they reflect a mode of reasoning that prioritized conceptual translation over doctrinal rigidity. This approach mirrors earlier Islamic engagements with non-Islamic philosophies, where translation and reinterpretation served as tools for intellectual expansion rather than theological dilution.[30] Through the works of Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi, the Han Kitab tradition demonstrates how Islam was articulated as an intellectually robust and ethically grounded tradition within the context of imperial Chinese thought. Their writings provide concrete examples of how religious ideas can be re-expressed across cultural boundaries without losing their normative core. Understanding these figures and texts is therefore essential for appreciating the Han Kitab as a deliberate and sustained intellectual project.

**Translating Islam into Chinese Thought**

The conceptual strategy of the Han Kitab may be seen most clearly in its treatment of three interconnected dimensions of Islamic teaching: tawḥīd, sharīʿa, and akhlāq. These concepts were not translated through simple one-to-one equivalence, but were interpreted through Chinese categories that performed comparable intellectual and ethical functions. Tawḥīd was discussed through the language of Tian (天, Heaven), allowing Muslim scholars to explain divine unity and the ultimate source of cosmic order in terms familiar to Confucian readers. Sharīʿa was articulated through Li (礼, ritual propriety), particularly in Liu Zhi's discussion of prayer, fasting, dietary discipline, and social obligations as practices that regulate conduct and cultivate moral order. Akhlāq, in turn, was related to Ren (仁, humaneness), since both traditions emphasize the formation of virtuous character, sincerity, self-restraint, and proper relations with others. These conceptual correspondences should not be

[30] James D. Frankel, "Making Islam Chinese: The Han Kitab Tradition," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2010): 1–5; Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 90–94.

understood as claims that the terms were identical. Rather, they functioned as interpretive bridges through which Islamic theology, law, and ethics became intelligible within the philosophical vocabulary of late imperial China.

The intellectual achievement of the Han Kitab tradition lies not merely in its ability to render Islamic teachings intelligible in Chinese, but in the depth of conceptual engagement through which this translation was accomplished. For Han Kitab scholars, translation was never a simple matter of substituting Arabic terms with Chinese equivalents. It involved a sustained effort to reposition Islamic concepts within an intellectual universe shaped by Confucian metaphysics, ethical priorities, and assumptions about cosmic order. In this sense, translation functioned as a form of intellectual mediation, allowing Islam to speak meaningfully within a distinct epistemic framework without surrendering its normative core.[31] At the heart of this mediating effort was the challenge of articulating *tawḥīd* (توحيد), the Islamic doctrine of divine unity, in a conceptual environment where theological discourse was not organized around revelation in the Islamic sense, but around moral cosmology. Rather than relying on classical Islamic theological vocabulary, Han Kitab scholars framed divine unity through the Confucian concept of *Tian* (天, Heaven). This was not an attempt to equate Allah with Heaven in a literal or doctrinally reductive manner. Instead, *Tian* served as a conceptual bridge through which the universality, transcendence, and moral authority of the divine could be expressed in terms familiar to Confucian thought.[32]

Within Confucian philosophy, *Tian* denotes both the source of cosmic order and the moral horizon against which human conduct is evaluated. By aligning *tawḥīd* with this concept, Han Kitab scholars emphasized that divine unity implies coherence, order, and moral

[31] Talal Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 141–164.

[32] Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 82–86.

intelligibility rather than arbitrary sovereignty. This reframing allowed Islam to be presented as a tradition deeply concerned with harmony between the cosmos and human conduct, a concern that resonated strongly with Confucian intellectual sensibilities. In this way, Islamic monotheism was not portrayed as a disruptive foreign belief, but as a clarification and deepening of principles already valued within Chinese moral philosophy.[33]

A similar process of conceptual translation is evident in the treatment of Islamic law. Han Kitab scholars were acutely aware that the juridical connotations commonly associated with *sharīʿa*(شريعة) could provoke misunderstanding within a Confucian milieu that prioritized ethical self-cultivation over formal legalism. To address this tension, they interpreted Islamic norms through the Confucian category of *Li* (礼, ritual propriety), a concept that governs proper conduct, social harmony, and moral discipline. Through this interpretive move, religious obligations were presented less as externally imposed commands and more as practices oriented toward ethical refinement and social order.[34] By framing ritual observance within the language of *Li*, Han Kitab authors reoriented the understanding of Islamic practice away from rigid legal compliance and toward disciplined moral formation. Prayer, fasting, and dietary regulations were depicted as techniques of self-regulation that cultivate awareness, restraint, and ethical responsibility. Such an interpretation allowed Islamic practices to be understood as compatible with Confucian ideals of moral education rather than as markers of cultural or communal separation.[35] This ethical reframing was crucial for positioning Islam as a morally constructive tradition within the social fabric of imperial China.

The emphasis on moral cultivation reaches its clearest expression in the Han Kitab treatment of *akhlāq* (أخلاق) or moral character. Across

[33] Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 101–105.

[34] James D. Frankel, *Rectifying God's Name: Liu Zhi's Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), pp. 56–60.

[35] Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), pp. 70–73.

Han Kitab texts, ethical transformation consistently appears as the ultimate purpose of religious life. This focus resonates strongly with the Confucian ideal of *Ren* (仁, humaneness), which defines moral excellence in terms of benevolence, empathy, and virtuous conduct toward others. By drawing parallels between *akhlāq* and *Ren*, Han Kitab scholars articulated a shared ethical vocabulary through which Islam could be understood as a tradition fundamentally concerned with human flourishing and social harmony.[36] This ethical convergence allowed Han Kitab authors to advance a powerful claim: that genuine religiosity is measured not by formal adherence to ritual alone, but by the cultivation of moral integrity. Ritual practice without ethical refinement was treated as incomplete, a position that echoes long-standing Confucian critiques of empty formalism. In articulating this view, Han Kitab scholars presented Islam as a comprehensive moral philosophy rather than a narrowly defined system of belief or law.[37] Such a portrayal was instrumental in securing intellectual legitimacy for Islam within a cultural context that evaluated religious traditions primarily through their ethical contributions. These interpretive strategies reveal that the Han Kitab tradition was the product of deliberate and sustained intellectual labor. Translation operated here as a strategic mode of engagement, enabling Muslim scholars to situate Islam within the dominant epistemic structures of imperial China. Rather than retreating into insularity or resisting cultural difference, Han Kitab scholars chose to engage Confucian philosophy on its own terms, thereby positioning Islam as a participant in Chinese intellectual life rather than an external challenge to it.[38] Crucially, this strategy did not entail the dilution or abandonment of core Islamic principles. The normative foundations of Islam remained intact even as their expression was reformulated. In this respect, the Han Kitab tradition mirrors earlier moments in Islamic

[36] Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 21–24.

[37] James D. Frankel, "Making Islam Chinese: The Han Kitab Tradition," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2010): 8–12.

[38] Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 45–48.

intellectual history in which Muslim scholars translated religious concepts into new philosophical languages while preserving theological continuity. Translation thus emerges not as a sign of compromise, but as a means of sustaining religious universality across cultural boundaries.[39]

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the Han Kitab tradition cannot be adequately understood as a passive adaptation of Islam to Chinese culture. Rather, it reflects a deliberate and methodologically consistent intellectual strategy pursued by Muslim scholars operating within the epistemic constraints and opportunities of imperial China. In this section, the discussion moves beyond textual exposition to reflect on the broader implications of Han Kitab as a form of Islamic intellectual engagement, situating it within debates on religious translation, minority epistemology, and the universality of Islamic thought. At its core, the Han Kitab project represents a conscious decision by Muslim scholars to engage the dominant intellectual language of their society rather than retreat into insular modes of religious expression. Confucianism was not merely a cultural backdrop but the authoritative framework through which moral legitimacy, intellectual seriousness, and social order were evaluated in imperial China. To speak meaningfully within this framework required more than linguistic fluency; it demanded conceptual alignment. Han Kitab scholars responded to this demand by positioning Islam as a tradition capable of addressing the same ethical and metaphysical concerns that occupied Confucian philosophy—cosmic order, moral cultivation, and social harmony.

This strategy becomes clearer when the core translations undertaken by Han Kitab scholars are viewed comparatively. Rather than translating Islamic concepts in isolation, they mapped them systematically onto Confucian categories that already carried intellectual authority. The following table summarizes this pattern of conceptual alignment:

[39] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 95–99.

Table 1 : Conceptual Correspondence between Islamic and Confucian Categories in the Han Kitab

| Islamic concept | Chinese conceptual category | Function in Han Kitab thought | Illustrative expression |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Tawḥīd* | Tian (天, Heaven) | Expresses divine unity and the ultimate source of cosmic and moral order | Wang Daiyu's reinterpretation of Tian preserves the distinction between the Creator and creation |
| ***Sharīʿa*** | Li (礼, ritual propriety) | Presents religious obligations as disciplined practices that regulate conduct and cultivate virtue | Liu Zhi's explanation of prayer, fasting, dietary rules, and social obligations |
| ***Akhlāq*** | Ren (仁, humaneness) | Connects Islamic moral character with Confucian ideals of humane conduct and self-cultivation | Sincerity, restraint, compassion, and proper relations with others |

This pattern suggests that translation in the Han Kitab tradition operated as a form of epistemic mediation. Islamic concepts were not diluted or replaced, but repositioned within a moral universe that prioritized ethical intelligibility over doctrinal exclusivity. In this sense, Han Kitab scholars were less concerned with asserting theological difference than with demonstrating moral compatibility. Islam was presented as a tradition that could contribute constructively to the ethical life of society, rather than as a competing metaphysical system. The analysis presented in the previous sections suggests that the Han Kitab tradition should not be understood as a passive accommodation of Islam to Chinese culture, nor as a marginal curiosity produced by a religious minority. Rather, it represents a deliberate and sustained intellectual

strategy developed by Muslim scholars who sought to position Islam within the dominant moral and philosophical order of imperial China.[40] This strategy was shaped by a clear awareness of the epistemic environment in which Confucianism functioned as the primary framework for evaluating ethical legitimacy, intellectual seriousness, and social harmony.

Within this context, Confucianism was not merely one tradition among others, but the authoritative language of moral reasoning and scholarly discourse. Any religious or philosophical system that aspired to intellectual recognition had to engage Confucian categories in a meaningful way. Han Kitab scholars responded to this challenge by presenting Islam as a tradition capable of addressing the same fundamental concerns that lay at the heart of Confucian thought—namely, the relationship between cosmic order and human conduct, the cultivation of moral character, and the maintenance of social harmony.[41] Through this engagement, Islam was articulated not as an oppositional or foreign system, but as a coherent moral philosophy intelligible within the Chinese intellectual world. The distinctive translations carried out in Han Kitab texts—such as interpreting *tawḥīd* (توحيد) through the concept of Tian, understanding *sharīʿa* (شريعة) through Li, and emphasizing *akhlāq* (أخلاق) in relation to Ren—should therefore be read as acts of conceptual mediation rather than theological compromise. These translations did not aim to erase doctrinal differences, but to render Islamic principles morally intelligible within a different epistemic grammar. In this sense, translation functioned as a strategy for intellectual participation, enabling Islamic ideas to circulate within a shared moral discourse without surrendering their normative foundations.[42] When situated within the broader history of Islamic thought, the Han Kitab strategy appears neither anomalous nor

[40]Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 118–122.

[41] James D. Frankel, *Rectifying God's Name: Liu Zhi's Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), pp. 93–97.

[42] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 27–30.

exceptional. Islamic intellectual traditions have repeatedly demonstrated the capacity to engage diverse philosophical languages while maintaining theological continuity. What distinguishes the Han Kitab is the ethical orientation of its engagement. By prioritizing moral cultivation over polemics or legal formalism, Han Kitab scholars aligned Islamic reasoning with a Confucian worldview that valued ethical self-transformation as the basis of social order.[43] This ethical emphasis allowed Islam to be embedded within the intellectual life of imperial China as a morally constructive tradition rather than as a culturally disruptive presence. The Han Kitab tradition exemplifies a sophisticated form of intellectual mediation through which Islam negotiated cultural difference without retreating into isolation or dilution. Its significance lies not only in its historical context, but in the broader theoretical insight it offers into how religious traditions can sustain universality through translation, ethical reasoning, and intellectual engagement. As such, the Han Kitab stands as an important case for understanding Islam as a dynamic intellectual tradition capable of articulating itself across diverse civilizational frameworks.

**Conclusion**

This study has argued that the Han Kitab should be understood as a significant intellectual project through which Muslim scholars in late imperial China translated Islamic teachings into the philosophical vocabulary of Confucianism. Rather than representing a process of religious syncretism or cultural compromise, Han Kitab scholars employed conceptual mediation to communicate Islamic theology, law, and ethics in ways that were intelligible within the dominant Chinese intellectual tradition. Through the works of Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi, concepts such as tawḥīd, sharīʿa, and akhlāq were articulated through the Confucian language of Tian, Li, and Ren, not as direct equivalents, but as interpretive bridges that preserved the theological distinctiveness of Islam while engaging with familiar philosophical categories. This approach

[43] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 102–106.

demonstrates that the Han Kitab was both an expression of Islamic intellectual continuity and a creative response to the cultural and philosophical environment of imperial China.

Beyond its historical significance, the Han Kitab offers a broader contribution to the study of Islamic intellectual history by illustrating how religious traditions maintain doctrinal continuity while adapting their conceptual language to new civilizational contexts. Similar to other moments of intellectual translation in the Islamic tradition, the Han Kitab demonstrates that engagement with external philosophical systems need not diminish the integrity of Islamic thought but can instead enrich its modes of expression. Understanding the Han Kitab from this perspective highlights the importance of conceptual translation as an enduring feature of Islamic scholarship and provides a valuable framework for future comparative studies on the interaction between Islam and other intellectual traditions.

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