

Chapter Title: The Chinese Classics in the Light of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics

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Book Title: Mysticism and Ethics in Islam

Book Editor(s): Bilal Orfali, Atif Khalil, and Mohammed Rustom

URL: <https://www.aub.edu.lb/aubpress/Pages/Mysticism-and-Ethics-in-Islam.aspx>



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THE CHINESE CLASSICS IN THE LIGHT OF IBN AL-‘ARABĪ’S METAPHYSICS

Mukhtar H. Ali

Although Islam arrived in China as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907), Islamic and Chinese civilizations have historically produced independent yet analogous cosmologies and philosophies. This study explores some of the metaphysical foundations of Chinese thought through the lens of Sufism, particularly the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240). Besides Toshihiko Izutsu’s *Sufism and Taoism*¹ and Sachiko Murata’s works, there are very few studies on the subject.² Murata’s *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* explores Islam in China mediated through certain Sufi texts, showing how Confucianism, Neo-Confucian metaphysics, Buddhism, and Taoism were assimilated into Islamic thought by Muslim scholars in China. Her earlier opus, *The Tao of Islam*, is one of the most compelling works of scholarship in the field of Sufi metaphysics, analyzing the gender dynamics found in Islamic philosophy and mysticism through the Taoist concepts of Yin and Yang. This groundbreaking work shows that much of Islamic cosmology is reminiscent of Chinese cosmology in that it is based upon a complementarity of the polarity of active and receptive principles.³

1. Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1983).

2. See Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Sachiko Murata, *The First Islamic Classic in Chinese: Wang Daiyu’s Real Commentary on the True Teaching* (Albany: State University New York Press, 2017); Sachiko Murata, William Chittick, and Tu Weiming, *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

3. Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 7.

Muslim authors might describe this duality as the transcendence and immanence of the divine Essence, or in Quranic terms, the divine names of Beauty and Majesty, which form the very fabric of existence. In the same way that Yin and Yang, which originate from the undifferentiated Tao, or “The Great Ultimate,” they are complementary opposites, each transforming into the other while at the same time containing an aspect of the other. God is also described in the Quran in complementary opposites: “He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden,”⁴ and created phenomena as “heaven and earth.” As the Sufi saying goes, “For every beauty, there is a majesty within it, and for every majesty, there is a beauty within it.”⁵

The earliest scholar to forge a common ground between Islamic thought and Chinese philosophy was Wáng Dàiyú (d. 1658). He wrote a work entitled the *Great Learning*, which is both named and modeled after a Confucian classic. It is clear from this work that Wang was a supporter of Confucian teachings and wished to harmonize them within the framework of Islamic doctrines. As Murata notes, “Wang depicts Islam in a way that makes it appear largely in agreement with Confucian ideas. He often quotes from the Chinese classics and sometimes employs Buddhist terminology to make his points.”⁶ The second most important figure of Chinese Islam is the Neo-Confucian thinker, Liú Zhì (d. 1739).⁷ He is particularly significant for our purposes since he translated into Chinese ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī’s (d. 1492) *Lawā’ih*, which is a summary of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings. Liú Zhì incorporated other classic Sufi works such Najm al-Dīn Razī’s (d. 1256) *Mirṣād al-‘ibād*, ‘Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī’s (d. ca. 1300) *Maqṣad-i aqṣā*, and Jāmī’s *Ashī‘at al-lama‘āt*,⁸ which had already been translated before Liú Zhì penned his own translation of the *Lawā’ih*.⁹ With respect to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s influence in China, Murata writes, “The fact that Jāmī is the author of two of the four Islamic works translated into Chinese certainly suggests that it was difficult to study Islam in Chinese without being exposed to Ibn al-‘Arabī.”¹⁰

The themes discussed here are common to both Islam and Chinese philosophy, namely, the oneness of existence, the model human or sage, and the hierarchy of being, referred to as the triad of Heaven, Earth, and Man. Just as the Taoist mystic Zhuāng Zhōu (d. 286 BCE) says, “Heaven and earth and I live together—all things and I are one,”¹¹ there are similar expressions in Islamic philosophy and mysticism concerning God, the macrocosm, and the microcosm. Beginning with two early

4. Quran 57:3. For translations from the Quran, I have used *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015), with emendations.

5. Qaysarī, Dāwūd b. Maḥmūd, and Mukhtar H. Ali. *The Horizons of Being: The Metaphysics of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the Muqaddimat al-Qaysarī*, (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 69.

6. Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*, 22.

7. Neo-Confucianism is a philosophical movement from the beginning of the tenth century that aimed to revive Confucian thought after its having competed with Taoism and Buddhism for centuries. Zhū Xī sought to assimilate key Taoist and Buddhist teachings with Confucian thought in his great synthesis.

8. The Chinese scholar P’o Na-Chi’h translated *Rays from the ‘Flashes’ (Ashī‘at al-lama‘āt)* into Chinese under the title *Chao-yüan pi-chüeh* [The mysterious secret of the original display]. See Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*, 33.

9. Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*, 25.

10. Sachiko Murata, “The Unity of Existence: Ibn ‘Arabī and His School” held at Worcester College, Oxford 2003.

11. Zhuāng Zhōu, *The Equality of Things*, 2.6. Zhuāng Zhōu (between 399 and 295 BCE) was a follower of Lǎozǐ and wrote the second most important book of Taoism.

Confucian¹² works, the *Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean*, both of which were selected by Zhū Xī (1130–1200)¹³ as the “four books”¹⁴ and the main source for Neo-Confucianism, and taking my lead from the likes of Liú Zhì, this study examines a number of key passages from *The Classic of the Way (Dàodé Jīng)* in light of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysics.

Ethics in the *Great Learning* (Dà Xué 大学)

Let us begin our inquiry with one of the earliest Confucian classics, the *Great Learning*.¹⁵ It is a treatise on the Confucian educational and moral paradigm. As a work on morality and practical life, its main thrust is the Confucian principles of humanism and altruism, manifesting in the “three things”: clear character, renewing the people, and abiding in the highest good. These are applied in the eight steps, which is the investigation of things, extension of knowledge, sincerity of the will, rectification of the mind, cultivation of the personal life, regulation of the family, natural order, and world peace. According to Zēng Shēn, the main text is a single page comprising the words of Confucius:

The Way of learning to be great consists of manifesting illustrious character, renewing the people, and abiding in the highest good.¹⁶

The ancients who wished to manifest illustrious virtue to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their hearts. Those who wished to rectify their hearts would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. When things are investigated, knowledge is extended. When knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere. When the will is sincere, the heart is rectified. When the heart is rectified, the personal life is cultivated. When the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated. When the family is regulated, the state will be in order. When the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world.

From the Son of Heaven (*Tiānzǐ* 天子)¹⁷ down to the common people, all must regard the cultivation of the personal life the root or foundation. There is never a case when the root is in disorder and the branches are in

12. Confucius (c. 551–c. 479 BCE) is the most celebrated Chinese philosopher. His teachings are preserved in the *Analects* (Lúnyǔ 論語).

13. Zhū Xī is regarded as one of the most influential Chinese philosophers along with Confucius, Mencius, Lǎozǐ, and Zhuāng Zhōu. See Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 588.

14. The four books are the *Analects of Confucius*, the *Book of Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean*. From 1313 to 1905, they formed the basis of civil service examinations in China. See Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 589.

15. The author is now believed to be Zēng Shēn 曾參, a disciple of Confucius who is often referred to as “Master Zēng” or Zēngzǐ 曾子. It is a one-page chapter in the *Book of Rites (Lǐjì* 禮記), the authoritative canon during the Former Han era (202 BCE–9 CE). Zhū Xī remarks, “Master Ch’eng I said, “The *Great Learning* is a surviving work of the Confucian school and is the gate through which the beginning student enters into virtue” (Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 85).

16. There are various translations of this statement: manifesting clear character and brilliant virtue.

17. The Son of Heaven is the king who has been given a divine right to rule. This doctrine stemmed from the Mandate of Heaven, first used by the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) to justify their rule.

order. There has never been a case where when what is treated with great importance becomes a matter of slight importance or what is treated with slight importance becomes a matter of great importance.¹⁸

All transformations begin with self-cultivation, or manifesting illustrious character. Commentators suggest that this is Heavenly character, or the contemplation of the illustrious mandate of Heaven. In other words, man's character is endowed with essential goodness founded on Heavenly or divine principles. When this character is refined, it becomes brilliant and luminous and is able to guide others. The refinement of character is brought about by knowledge and sincerity. Knowledge develops the intellect, and sincerity rectifies the heart. What remains thereafter is to abide in the highest good and reach the station of tranquility. The order in the world depends on the order in the human being, since all levels of organization are interconnected, as a single tree connects the branches to the root.

Islamic teachings share the very same principles of the highest good found in the *Great Learning* since Prophetic wisdom states that man was modelled after divine principles; "God created Adam in His own image."¹⁹ Furthermore, the prophetic prescription to attain the highest morality is found in his statement, "Assume the divine character" (*takhallaqū bi akhlāq 'llāh*).²⁰ The divine character is described by the divine names and attributes, a central theme to which Sufi authors such as Qushayrī, Ghazālī, and Ibn al-ʿArabī devoted many writings.²¹ Ibn al-ʿArabī opens his work, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, with the idea that God created the human being to manifest the totality of divine attributes. "Man was the epitome of the divine presence, so He selected him to be [His] image, saying, 'God created Adam in His own image,' or in another tradition, 'in the form of the Merciful.'"²²

Sincere will resides in the heart, the center of the human reality. The heart's centrality in virtually all spiritual traditions including Islam is well established. The Prophet said, "There is in the body of the son of Adam a piece of flesh which, if it be sound, causes the rest of the body to be sound, and if it be corrupt, causes the rest of the body to be corrupt. Indeed, it is the heart."²³ "God does not look at your forms but looks at your hearts and deeds."²⁴ However, in Islam, nothing in existence has been ennobled by the vision of God like the heart, since, "Neither My heaven nor My earth embraces Me, but the heart of My servant with faith does embrace Me."²⁵ Although the ethical actor, or *jūnzī* 君子, as early as the *Great Learning*, cannot be equated with the concept of the vicegerent of God (*khalīfa*) mentioned in the Quran, or the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) in Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings, there is a clear connection between living in accordance with the divine order and attaining the highest good.

18. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 86.

19. Muḥammad b. Ismaʿīl b. Ibrahīm al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1986), 6227 and Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1999), no. 2841. See also Genesis 1:27 in the Bible.

20. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Maṣṣad al-asnā* (Beirut: Dār el-Machreq, 1971), 150.

21. See ʿIzz al-Dīn b. ʿAbd al-Salām, *Shajarat al-maʿārif* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1998), 53; Muḥyi-l-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Kashf al-maʿnā ʿan sirr al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā* (Qum: Manshūrāt Bakhshāyish, 1998); *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut: Dar Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1998), chapter 558.

22. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ fi sharḥ Naqsh al-fuṣūṣ*, ed. W. C. Chittick (Tehran: Iranian Institute of Philosophy, 2001), 394.

23. Muḥammad b. Ismaʿīl b. Ibrahīm al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1986), vol. 1, Book 2, Hadith 50.

24. Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1999), no. 2564.

25. Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Sharafiyya, 1908), 3:1.5 and 3:12.

As for the social responsibility of one who follows the Way after having rectified the self, he renews the people and brings order to the family and state. Imam ‘Alī describes the spiritual trajectory of the enlightened sage who has made contemplation of God the mainstay of his life’s activity. Having been awakened by divine light, he is steadfast on the path of Truth and impervious to worldly enticements. In turn, he is guided and becomes a guide for others, reaching ultimately at the station of tranquility as the Quran states, “O tranquil soul, return to your Lord, pleased, well-pleasing. Enter among My servants, enter My paradise.”²⁶

Explaining the verse, “Men whom trade does not divert,” Imam ‘Alī says, “Truly, God has made remembrance (*al-dhikr*) a polish for the hearts, by which they hear after being deaf, and see after being blind and yield after being resistant. There have always been servants of God throughout the ages with whom He held intimate discourse in their thoughts and spoke with them through their intellects. They diffused light through an awakened illumination in their hearing, their sight and their minds, calling unto the remembrance of the days of God and invoking reverence for His status, like guideposts in the desert. Whoever adopts the Way, they praise his path and give him glad tidings of deliverance, but whoever goes right and left, they disparage his ways and warn him of ruin. Thus, they serve as lamps in darkness and guides through doubts.”²⁷

Metaphysics in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhōng yōng 中庸)

If the *Great Learning* is moral and practical, the *Doctrine of the Mean* is religious and, at times, mystical. It is a discourse on psychology and metaphysics, concentrating on human nature and the Way of Heaven. It is a precursor to the full mystical ontology of Taoism and a bridge between Confucian and Taoist thought. The treatise revolves around Heaven and Man, namely the superior man, or the ideal human being who is in harmony with the principle of Heaven. In Chinese, the work is called *zhōng yōng*; *zhōng* means central, referring to human nature, and *yōng* means universal and harmonious. Together it signifies: “there is harmony in human nature and [that] this harmony underlies our moral being and prevails throughout the universe.”²⁸

What Heaven (*tiān* 天) imparts to man is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way (Tao). Cultivating the Way is called education. The Way cannot be separated from us for a moment . . . Equilibrium is the great foundation of the world, and harmony is the universal path. When equilibrium and harmony are realized to the highest degree, heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish.²⁹

What Heaven imparts to man is called *fiṭra* in Islamic terms, as the verse of the Quran states, “So turn your face to religion, in pure faith—with God-given nature

26. Quran 89:27–30.

27. Imām ‘Alī b. Abū Ṭālib, *Nahj al-balāgha* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-A‘lamī li’l Maṭbū‘āt, 1996), Sermon 221.

28. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 96.

29. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 98.

(*fiṭra*) upon which He has fashioned mankind; There is no modifying of God's creation. That is the true religion, but most people do not know."³⁰ Islam is known as the natural religion (*dīn al-fiṭra*). *Fiṭra* means creation, initiation and origination, *dīn* literally means way and *islām* means submission. Taken together, this idea can be expressed as submission to the Way of original nature, fashioned by the divine order. Just as the Way cannot be separated from us for a moment, there is no changing in God-given nature or *fiṭra*. The Quran refers to the human reality as originating from the divine spirit, "When I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My spirit . . ." ³¹ When that spirit enters the body, it is called *fiṭra*, since its root meaning is to split open; that is, the reality of the spirit opens up in the human frame, rather than remaining hidden in the immaterial world. *Fiṭra* also refers to the Intellect, which is one of the aspects of the spirit. Both spirit and intellect have been used interchangeably in the Hadith, referring to different aspects of the same reality, namely, the first creation, "The first thing that God created was my spirit,"³² and, "The first thing that God created was the Intellect."³³

Because of the pervasiveness of humanism in Chinese philosophy, the concept of a Supreme Being has been sublimated in ideas such as the Tao, Heaven, and Principle (*li* 理). In contrast, nothing can be more central in Islam than the concept of God. These are not competing ontologies nor contraries. They are simply terms that are specific to a particular cultural and linguistic context. As we will see in the next section, the Sufis also describe God in philosophical or mystical terms such as Being and the Truth, expressing what the Chinese describe as the Way. The Chinese emphasized the unity of Man and Heaven or the supreme spiritual reality, rather than the Lord, a term which was used in pre-Confucian times. Why this shift occurred from a personal deity to the more philosophical concept of the Way or Heaven is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, to suppose that Chinese philosophical and religious thought does not subscribe to a Supreme Being is to lose sight of its fundamental ontology, becoming lost in terminological differences. The reality that the Abrahamic religions called God, the Chinese referred to as the Tao, and the divine cosmic order as Heaven.

Following your nature is cultivating the Way (Tao), and this is education. Knowledge is intrinsic to human nature, and true education is to unearth those inward realities. Imam 'Alī says, "Knowledge is not in the heavens that it might descend upon you nor in the depths of the earth that it may ascend to you, but it is forged in your natures, so assume the characteristics of the spiritual and it will become manifest to you."³⁴ The text also indicates the true nature of education, which is cultivating the self before seeking knowledge externally. In this regard, the Prophet has said, "He who knows himself knows his Lord."³⁵ If we were to restate this in ancient Chinese idiom, it might sound like, "he who cultivates himself,

30. Quran 30:30.

31. Quran 38:72.

32. Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī. *Biḥār al-anwār li-durar akhbār al-a'imma al-aṭḥār* (Beirut: al-Wafā', 1983), 1:97, no. 7.

33. Muḥammad b. Bābawayh al-Qummī (Ṣadūq), *al-Khiṣāl* (Qum: Mu'assasat Nashr al-Islāmī, 2003), 589, no. 13.

34. Muḥsin Fayd Kāshānī, *al-Maḥajja al-bayda'* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lamī li'l Maṭbū'āt, 1983), 158.

35. 'Abd al-Wāḥid Āmidī, *Ghurur al-ḥikam wa-durar al-kalim* (Qom: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 1990), no. 8946.

knows the Way.” *The Doctrine of the Mean* posits the essential goodness of human nature, because it arrives from Heaven itself and all things reach their perfection through its equilibrium. Islamic moral philosophy revolves around man’s return to his divine, original nature after having transcended his lower, earthly nature.

In the next section, the text describes the superior man, the sage or the one who exemplifies the Way.

The superior man exemplifies the Mean. The inferior man acts contrary to the Mean . . . He rectifies himself and seeks nothing from others, hence he has no complaint to make. He does not complain against Heaven above or blame men below.³⁶

Imam ‘Alī says, “He who honors his soul, the world becomes small in his eyes,”³⁷ and, “The greatness of their Creator is seated in their Hearts so all else appears small in their eyes.”³⁸ Muslim scholars might refer to this as spiritual chivalry, as Anṣārī says, “The essence of *futuwwa* is that you do not see yourself being owed any favor, nor that you demand any right.”³⁹

Great is the way of the sage! Overflowing, it produces and nourishes all things and rises up to the heights of Heaven . . . Therefore it is said, “Unless there is perfect virtue, the perfect Way cannot be materialized.” Therefore, the superior man honors moral nature and follows the path of inquiry and study.⁴⁰

The concept of the sage, or superior man, is pervasive in Chinese thought as it is in Islam. Ibn al-‘Arabī describes the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) as the prophets, saints, and sages. In Quranic terminology, it is the divine vicegerent (*khalīfa*) and those who have at least arrived at the level of the tranquil soul (*al-nafs al-muṭma’inna*).

Through the perfect human, God maintains and nourishes the world. He writes:

The Pole is both the center of the universe and its circumference.⁴¹ He is the mirror of God and the pivot of the world. He is bound by subtle links to the hearts of all created beings and brings them either good or evil, neither one predominating . . . some are superior to others, but this superiority relates only to their spiritual knowledge, and there is no distinction to be made between them as regards their office (*quṭbiyya*) and the government of the universe (*tadbīr al-wujūd*).⁴²

Furthermore,

No one was entitled to be the vicegerent except the Perfect Man, for God created his outward form out of all the realities and forms of the world, and his inward form on the model of His own form. Nothing in the world possesses the comprehensiveness that is possessed by the

36. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 101.

37. Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam*, no. 9130.

38. Imam ‘Alī, *Nahj al-balāgha*, Sermon 193.

39. ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, *Sharḥ manāzil al-sā’irīn*, ed. M. Bidārfar (Qom: Bidār, 1993), 248.

40. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 110.

41. The Pole (*quṭb*) is the highest individual in existence and in the hierarchy of sainthood.

42. Ibn al-‘Arabī, “Kitāb manzil al-quṭb,” in *Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2001), 2, 6.

vicegerent. In fact, he has obtained (his vicegerency) only because of his comprehensiveness.⁴³

Thus, the sage in the *Doctrine of the Mean* has a counterpart in Islam. It is through this individual that the Way is known and the world is maintained. This is why Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”⁴⁴

Finally, the essence of the Way is sincerity. Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can develop their nature, they can fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.

Only those who are absolutely sincere can order and adjust the great relations of mankind, establish great foundations of humanity and know the transforming and nourishing operations of Heaven and Earth . . . How earnest and sincere—he is humanity! How deep and unfathomable—he is abyss! How vast and great—he is Heaven! Who can know him except he who really has quickness of apprehension, intelligence, sagacity, and wisdom, and understands the character of Heaven?⁴⁵

God revealed to the Prophet, “No sooner do I look into a servant’s heart and find that he has the love of sincere obedience for My sake, seeking My satisfaction, than I take charge of his plans and affairs.”⁴⁶ Sincerity is also the highest principle in Islam, as Imam ‘Alī says: “sincerity is the aim of religion,”⁴⁷ “sincerity is the criterion of worship,”⁴⁸ and “the fruit of knowledge is sincerity of action.”⁴⁹

The Prophet said, “People will be ruined except the knowledgeable. The knowledgeable will be ruined except those who act. Those who act will be ruined except the sincere, and the sincere are in grave danger.”⁵⁰ He also correlates wisdom with sincerity in his saying, “He who becomes sincere for God for forty days, wellsprings of wisdom emerge from his heart onto his tongue.”⁵¹

43. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1980), 23–24.

44. The Holy Bible: New International Version (Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), John 14:6.

45. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 112.

46. Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 85:136, no. 16.

47. Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam*, no. 727.

48. Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam*, no. 859.

49. Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam*, no. 4642.

50. Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, 4:157. In another version, Imam ‘Alī says: Those who act will perish except for those who worship; those who worship will perish except for those who know; those who know will perish except for those who are truthful; those who are truthful will perish except for those who are sincere; those who are sincere will perish except for those who have precaution; those who have precaution will perish except for those who have certainty; and those who have certainty are of exalted character (Imam Jā’far al-Ṣādiq, *Miṣbāḥ al-sharī‘a*, on *Ikhhlās*).

51. Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 67:249; Muḥammad b. Bābawayh al-Qummī (Ṣadūq), *‘Uyūn akhbār al-Ridhā* (Qum: Mu’assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1958), 2:69, no. 321.

Mysticism in the *Classic of the Way* (Dàodé Jīng 道德經)

It is not until Lǎozǐ’s *The Classic of the Way* do we find a truly transcendental spirit in Chinese thought.⁵² If Confucianism reflects on humanism, then Taoism contemplates pure Being. Taoist philosophy is remarkably similar to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysics. Let us now turn our attention to some seminal passages of the *Dàodé Jīng* through the lens of Ibn al-‘Arabī and his commentators.

The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.
The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The Named is the Mother of all things.⁵³

Whatever can be said about the Tao is not the Tao itself, since the nameless Tao refers to the absolute divine Essence, which is incomparable. The Essence is unknowable because “there is nothing like Him.”⁵⁴ Essence means existence and reality. The Essence of God refers to His very existence because He exists through Himself. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s says, “His Essence is the Unseen Singularity (*ghayb al-aḥadiyya*). It also means absolute Being divested of conditions, attributes, and entities.”⁵⁵ Qayṣarī writes, “If the reality of Being is not conditioned by anything, it is an exclusive oneness called the Degree of Singularity (*al-aḥadiyya*). If it is conditioned by something, either universal or particular, which are the names and attributes, it is called the Degree of Divinity (*al-ulūhiyya*), the Unity (*al-wāḥidiyya*), and the Station of Union (*maqām al-jam‘*).”⁵⁶ Thus, the Nameless is the unknowable Essence, divested of all attributes, and the origin of every subsequent divine and contingent degree.⁵⁷ Imam ‘Alī eloquently states the purest expression of divine unity here: “The perfection of affirming His oneness is positing His transcendence, and the perfection of positing His transcendence is divesting Him of attributes—because of the testimony of every attribute that it is other than the attributed, and that the attributed is other than the attribute.”⁵⁸

The Named refers to the Degree of Unity, which is the union of the divine names. It refers to the name Allah, which sometimes refers to the collectivity of the divine names and sometimes to the unknowable Essence, as in the verse, “Say: He is Allah, the One.”⁵⁹ The word Allah is derived from the Arabic root *alif*, *lām* and *hā*, which means “to be perplexed,” from the verb *aliha*,⁶⁰ so Allah is that about which the minds are perplexed. The divine names are uncreated realities of the Singular Essence and all things originate from the names. Therefore, the Degree of Unity is the Mother of all things to which Imam ‘Alī alludes, “[I ask You] by Your Names,

52. Lǎozǐ was believed to be a native of Ch’u and contemporary of Confucius.

53. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 139.

54. Quran 42:11.

55. ‘Abd al-Karīm Jilī, *al-Insān al-kāmil* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, 2000), 1:13.

56. Ali, *The Horizons of Being*, 55.

57. The divine degrees are emanations of the Essence and are not created. One can make a mental distinction between absolute, singular Being, and Being with distinct manifestations.

58. Imam ‘Alī, *Nahj al-balāgha*, Sermon 1.

59. Quran 112:1.

60. Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣubḥ, 2006), 1:96.

which have filled the foundations of all things,”⁶¹ and in the Quran, “To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names.”⁶²

The opening paragraph of the *Dàodé Jīng* can be considered one of the greatest discourses on divine unity (*tawhīd*). It posits that existence emanates from pure Being, not non-being as some interpret. Pure Being is absolute and cannot be named because it does not have distinctions. Because it is all-pervasive one might imagine that it does not exist. In his enigmatic description of Reality, Imām ‘Alī says, “Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa*) is the unveiling of the splendors of divine Majesty (*subūḥāt al-jalāl*) to which no allusion is possible (*min ghayr al-ishāra*).”⁶³

The Nameless and the Named are two degrees of Being that allude to the divine Essence and subsequently its relationship to creation. In Islamic theology, God is both transcendent and immanent, and this fact cannot be fathomed by the intellect alone. Imam ‘Alī describes this relationship here: “God is in all things but not admixed within them and separate from all things but not isolated from them.”⁶⁴ Thus, as the Quran states, “He is the First, the Last, the Visible, and the Hidden.”⁶⁵

Therefore, let there always be non-being so we may see their mystery.

And let there always be being so we may see their outcome.

The two are the same.

But after they are produced, they have different names.

They both may be called deep and profound.

The door of all mysteries.⁶⁶

Here, non-being does not refer to absolute non-being, which has no existence. This is why the text reads “let there always be non-being.” Positing non-being is a contradiction, unless it is used metaphorically to mean *pure* Being, which is all-inclusive. It is called non-being because it is without distinction and thus invisible. God’s invisibility is due to the intensity of His manifestation, and His remoteness is due to His extreme proximity. That is why non-being is the same as Being. They have different names when there is manifestation, or when they are “produced.” Qaysarī writes, “Thus, if you hear a gnostic say, ‘The created itself is non-being, and all existence belongs to God,’ then accept it, for his statement relates to this aspect.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, he says, “His being other than them is through His invisibility in His Essence, His exaltedness by His attributes above all deficiency and dishonor, His transcendence from limitation and specification, and His being sanctified from the characteristics of origination and creation. His being identical with all things is by manifesting Himself in the raiment of the divine names both in the [divine] knowledge and the external world.”⁶⁸ Thus, the door to all mysteries is to fathom God’s transcendence and immanence simultaneously.

61. Abbas Qummī, *Mafātīḥ al-jinān* (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwā’, 2014), 86. See the Supplication of Kumayl.

62. Quran 7:180.

63. Ḥaydar Āmulī, *Jāmi‘ al-asrār wa-manba‘ al-anwār*, eds. Henry Corbin and Osman Yahia (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Ta’rīkh al-‘Arabī, 1969), 170.

64. Imam ‘Alī, *Nahj al-balāgha*, Sermon 1.

65. Quran 57:3.

66. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 139.

67. Alī, *The Horizons of Being*, 111.

68. Alī, *The Horizons of Being*, 37.

There was a beginning of the universe
 Which may be called the Mother of the Universe.
 He who has found the Mother (Tao)
 And thereby understands her sons
 And having understood the sons,
 Still keeps to its mother
 Will be free from danger throughout his lifetime.⁶⁹

The equivalent idea of the Mother of the Universe in Islamic thought is the Mother of the Book (*umm al-kitāb*), which is mentioned in the Quran and Hadith.⁷⁰ According to the gnostics, it refers to the plane of divine knowledge, which engenders the First Intellect and the Universal Soul. Alternatively, it can be said that the Mother of the Universe is the Supreme divine name, which encompasses all other names. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s followers refer to the Universal names of Life, Knowledge, Will, Power, Speech, Generosity, and Justice as the Mothers, and the subordinate names as the daughters. The sons, therefore, are the manifestation of those names, or the sons are the branches and the mother is the root. Thus, having understood the sons, one keeps to the mother. That is, to know creation is to know the names that engender it. This way, the branch is always nourished by the root and one is free from danger and destruction.

Therefore, the sage manages affairs without action (*wú wèi* 無爲)
 And spreads doctrines without words.
 All things arise, and he does not turn away from them.
 He produces them but does not take possession of them.
 He acts but does not rely on his own ability.⁷¹
 He accomplishes his task but does not claim credit for it.
 It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his accomplishment
 remains with him.⁷²

There is a perceived disagreement between the Confucians and the Taoists on whether action or non-action takes precedence. Confucians maintain that the sage becomes the “model of the world” or “adopts the virtue of Heaven,” and the Taoists assert that the sage “manages affairs without action” and “spreads doctrines without words.” The Islamic spiritual tradition reconciles these seemingly contradictory views of active and passive reformation in the doctrine of annihilation and subsistence in God. Annihilation is the disappearance of selfhood through the transformation of human qualities by divine attributes, and subsistence is the return of selfhood through the investiture of divine attributes. In the latter, God becomes the servant’s hearing and vision, as the Hadith states: “The servant does not cease approaching me through supererogatory works until I love him, and when I love him, I become his hearing through which he hears, his sight by which he sees, his tongue by which he speaks, his hand by which he seizes, and

69. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 152.

70. “God effaces what He wills and establishes; to Him belongs the Mother of the Book” (Quran 13:39).

71. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 140.

72. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 140.

his foot by which he walks.”⁷³ Reconciling both Confucian and Taoist perspectives, the perfect human “adopts the virtue of Heaven,” and “manages affairs without action” by becoming the locus of divine receptivity and activity.

Taoist ideas of vacuity (*xū* 絮), non-being (*wǔ* 五), and non-action (*wǔ wèi* 五味) are not nihilistic but reveal a profound ontology founded on the unity of Being. Taoism is not the doctrine of non-action or pure determinism. On the contrary, it is effortless action, flowing naturally with existential currents. The sage works but does not take credit for it; he acts but does not rely on his own ability; thus, he unifies his act with the divine act. Therefore, he sees that his acts are more worthy of being attributed to God than himself. He is the greatest divine manifestation, and it is precisely because he witnesses the divine in himself that he is a sage.⁷⁴

Can you keep the spirit and embrace the One without departing from them?

Can you concentrate your vital force (*qì* 氣) and achieve the highest degree of weakness like an infant?

Can you clean and purify your profound insight so it will be spotless?

Can you love people and govern the state without cunning?⁷⁵

Embracing the One also reveals the spirit of Islamic divine unity (*tawḥīd*). Many believe that it applies only to God’s Essence, but in reality, it applies to Being in general. The true monotheist believes that there is nothing in existence but God and His manifestations. As Mullā Ṣadrā writes, “The Sufis, among the monotheists, are of the view that there is nothing in existence except the Real Being and the world is only the theophany, manifestation, and individuation of Being. They see nothing in existence except God and His manifestations, and they do not view the manifestations as an independent reality.”⁷⁶ This is the principle of unity within multiplicity.

Concentrating one’s vital force and achieving the highest degree of weakness like an infant is equivalent to the Islamic notion of submission to God, the lexical meaning of the word “*islām*”. The highest station of the human is that of servanthood, as Imam Ja’far al-Ṣādiq says, “Servanthood is a reality whose innermost aspect is Lordship. Whatever is missing in servitude is found in Lordship, and whatever is hidden in Lordship is attained in servitude.”⁷⁷ God addresses the Prophet as the servant when he takes him on the spiritual ascent (*mi’rāj*): “Glory be to Him who made His servant ascend . . .”⁷⁸ Truly in this conception do we see the trinity of Heaven, Man, and Earth, or in Islamic terms, God, His creation, and the perfect human who is the manifestation of all the divine names; “We taught Adam all the

73. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. M. D. al-Bughā, 6 vols. (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1987), 5: 2384–85 (*kitāb al-riqāq*).

74. Zhuāng Zhōu says, “The perfect man is a spiritual being. Even if great oceans burned up, he would not feel hot. Even if the great rivers are frozen, he would not feel cold. And even if terrific thunder were to break up mountains and the wind were to upset the sea, he would not be afraid. Being such, he mounts upon the clouds and forces heaven, rides on the sun and the moon, and roams beyond the four seas. Neither life nor death affects him. How much less can such matters as benefit and harm?” (Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 188).

75. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 144.

76. Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shirāzī, *Sharḥ al-hidāya al-Athīriyya* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Tā’rikh al-‘Arabī, 2001), 245.

77. Imām Ja’far b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq, *Misbāḥ al-sharī‘a* (Beirut: Mu’assasa al-A’lami li’l Maṭbū‘at, 1983), 7.

78. Quran 17:1.

names.”⁷⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabī explains this verse, “He taught him all the divine names. As the spirit is the commander of the bodily powers, the divine names are like those powers in the Perfect Human. For this reason, it is said that the world is the Great Man but with man within it. Man was the epitome of the divine presence, so He selected him to be [His] form, saying, ‘God created Adam in His own form,’ or in another tradition, ‘in the form of the All-Merciful.’”⁸⁰

When the great Tao declined,
The Doctrines of humanity (*rén*) and righteousness (*lǐ*) arose.
When knowledge and wisdom appeared,
There emerged great hypocrisy.⁸¹

Abandon sagacity and discard wisdom;
Then the people will benefit a hundredfold.
Abandon humanity and discard righteousness;
Then the people will return to piety and deep love.⁸²

To abandon sagacity and wisdom is to transcend learning. This is because the true sage receives directly from God and does not rely on his own learning as the Quran states, “Be God-conscious and God will teach you.”⁸³ With respect to this type of divine knowledge, Imam Ja‘far al-Šādiq said, “Knowledge is not extensive learning, it is but a light that God casts in the heart of whomever He wishes to guide.”⁸⁴ Lǎozǐ rejects the Confucian preoccupation with the concepts of humanity and righteousness where the former is seen as pretense and the latter blind adherence to rituals. The Taoist criticism is that when man became forgetful of the Tao, he invented doctrines, rituals, and ceremonies to organize society. These did not originate from the Tao itself but from the minds of men and the promulgation of various philosophical schools. Then these pseudo-spiritual teachings were passed from one generation to the next until the true meaning of the Tao was lost. Similarly, in Islam, Imam ‘Alī said, “Knowledge is a single point, the ignorant made it multiple.”⁸⁵ These teachings reflect advanced stages of spirituality whereby one relinquishes knowledge and learning.

Having examined a few salient passages of the *Dàodé Jīng* that concern ontology, humanity, and the nature of knowledge, we conclude by contemplating on some timeless maxims found in this text.

He who knows others is wise;
He who knows himself is enlightened.
He who conquers others has physical strength
He who conquers himself is strong.
He who is contented is rich.

79. Quran 2:31.

80. Jāmī, *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ Naqsh al-fuṣṣiṣ*, 394.

81. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 148.

82. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 149.

83. Quran 2:282.

84. Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 1:225.

85. Ibn Abi Jumhūr al-Aḥṣā‘ī, *‘Awālī al-la‘ālī*, ed. Mujtabā ‘Irāqī (Qom: 1984–85), 4:129; Ismā‘īl b. Muḥammad ‘Ajlūnī, *Kashf al-khafā’* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1968), 2:67.

He who acts with vigor has will.
 He who does not lose his place with the Tao will endure.
 He who dies but does not really perish enjoys long life.⁸⁶

The best (person) is like water
 Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them.
 It dwells in (low) places that all disdain.
 This is why it is so near the Tao.
 (The best person) in his dwelling loves the earth.
 In his heart, he loves what is profound.
 In his associations, he loves humanity.
 In his words, he loves faithfulness.
 In government, he loves order.
 In handling affairs, he loves competence.
 In his activities, he loves timeliness.
 It is because he does not compete, he is without reproach.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to survey three classical Chinese philosophical texts that have had the greatest impact on Chinese civilization, interpreting them through the lens of Islamic teachings and the Sufism of Ibn al-‘Arabī, in continuation of the project started by the likes of Wáng Dàiyú and Liú Zhì. The *Dào dé Jīng* is the longest of the three works we have considered in this article. In many passages, Lǎozǐ plays on contradictions and contravenes common sense. For example, how can one abandon sagacity and discard wisdom? Is the sage not characterized by these very qualities?

These statements sublimate hidden meanings or those that contradict popular imagination. It is the very nature of a mystical text to lend itself to various interpretations, its real intent hidden and full meaning always out of grasp. Which principle is being implemented in these paradoxical statements? The answer is that Being embraces contraries, and because every reality has an outward and inward aspect, a statement can be both true and false depending on which aspect is being highlighted. For example, when Lǎozǐ says, “He who knows does not speak, he who speaks does not know,” what he possibly means is that silence is closer to wisdom and speaking is closer to folly. It is similar to Imam ‘Alī’s words, “Silence is the sign of nobility and fruit of the intellect,”⁸⁸ and, “Silence is the garden of thought.”⁸⁹ He also says, “Silence is one of the doors of wisdom. It secures love and leads to

86. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 156.

87. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 143.

88. Āmidī, *Ghurur al-ḥikam*, no. 1343.

89. Āmidī, *Ghurur al-ḥikam*, no. 546.

every good,”⁹⁰ and, “Do not speak all that you know for that will only prove your ignorance.”⁹¹ At the same time, the sage uses words to teach wisdom. Therefore, context is essential in interpreting these types of contradictory statements.

The three selected texts progress from ethics, metaphysics, and mysticism. These are, indeed, overlapping and unifying themes, but a comparison reveals that the methodology of mysticism differs from that of ethics and metaphysics. Islamic ethics focuses on virtue, human character and dispositions; metaphysics on God, Man and the nature of existence; and mysticism on attainment, transcendence, and union.

90. Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, 2:113, no. 1.

91. Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam*, no. 10187.

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