Sufi Theory in Chinese

Çin Dilinde Tasavvuf Düşüncesi

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Abstract

There are only four Islamic texts on theology and philosophy which are known to have been translated into Chinese before the twentieth century. One of them, *Ashiʿʿat al-lamaʿāt*, Jāmī's commentary on Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī's *Lamaʿāt*, was translated by She Yunshan. He was one of the earliest members of the school of thought known as "the Muslim Confucianists." In this article, I will present a few examples from Yunshan's translation, who is also known by the penname Ponachi, in order to illustrate the elegance of his understanding of the universal dimensions of Sufism.

Keywords: She Yunshan, Ponachi, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, the Rays of the Flashes.

Özet

Yirminci yüzyıldan önce Çinceye tercüme edildiği bilinen sadece dört adet dinî-tasavvufî metni bulunmaktadır. Bunlardan biri, Mollâ Câmî'nin Fahreddîn Irâkî'nin *Lemaʿât* adlı eserine yazdığı şerh olan *Eşiaʿʿtü'l-lemaʿât*'tır. Eserin mütercimi olan She Yunshan, "Müslüman Konfüçyanistler" olarak bilinen düşünce okulunun ilk üyelerinden biridir. Bu makalede, "Ponachi" mahlasıyla da tanınan Yunshan'in sözü edilen tercümesinden birkaç örnek sunarak, onun tasavvufun evrensel boyutlarına dair sahip olduğu derin anlayışı göstermeye çalışacağım.

Anahtar Kelimeler: She Yunshan, Ponachi, Abdurrahmân Câmî, Eşiaʿʿtü'l-lemaʿât.

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Introduction

Only four Islamic texts on theology and philosophy are known to have been translated into Chinese before the twentieth century. All four were in Persian and written by well-known Sufi teachers. Two are from the thirteenth century, namely *Mirṣād al-ʿibād* of Najm al-Dīn Rāzī and *Maqṣad-i aqṣā* of ʿAzīz Nasafī. Two more were written by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, the prolific poet and propagator of Ibn ʿArabī's school of thought, who died in 898/1492.

One of the two books by Jāmī was *Lawāʾiḥ*, which was translated by Liu Zhi 劉智 in the early 18th century, and which I translated into English in *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*.[1] The other is *Ashiʿʿat al-lamaʿāt*, "The Rays of the Flashes," which is Jāmī's commentary on Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī's *Lamaʿāt*. ʿIrāqī wrote *The Flashes*, which is an exquisite little text on divine love, after attending Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī's lectures on Ibn ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. So, in fact, we have three Chinese texts pertaining to the line of Ibn ʿArabī and Qūnawī. Two are by Jāmī and the third is by ʿIrāqī, which is included in Jāmī's text. The translator, however, makes no attempt to distinguish ʿIrāqī's text from Jāmī's commentary, so it would be extremely difficult to separate the Chinese text of the *Flashes* from its explanation.

The translator of *Rays* was She Yunshan 舍蘊善. I will be referring to him as Ponachi 破衲癡, which is the penname he used when he translated the book. He was one of earliest and most active members of the school of thought known as the Huiru, "the Muslim Confucianists." He was also involved with the translation of *Maqṣad-i aqṣā*. He was born around 1635 and was still alive in 1697, when he wrote a preface to the genealogy of the Huiru composed by one of his students.[2]

We do not know when Ponachi translated *Rays*. From the genealogy we do know that he found it the most difficult of the Persian texts with which he worked. This is not surprising, given that Jāmī was well-versed in the technical terminology that was established in the thirteenth century by Qūnawī and his students, such as Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī, ʿAfīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī, and Muʾayyid al-Dīn Jandī. None of these authors is easy to read. In contrast, even though ʿIrāqī was a student of Qūnawī, he wrote prose and poetry that is relatively simple and straightforward.

In any case, in his commentary on the *Lamaʿāt*, Jāmī wanted to show that ʿIrāqī's text, despite its apparent simplicity, is deeply rooted in this school of philosophical Sufism. Jāmī was of course a master of this school of thought, as he demonstrates in several theoretical books. The earliest of his books on philosophical Sufism was *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ*, which consists mainly of texts selected or translated from the main line of Ibn ʿArabī's followers. And the last of his books was his Arabic commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*.

Jāmī's 150-page commentary on the *Lamaʿāt* has a dense introduction concerning technical terms. He then uses this terminology throughout the text in order to show how ʿIrāqī is firmly rooted in the metaphysics, cosmology, and spiritual psychology that formed the backbone of this school of thought.

In their writings the Chinese scholars made little or no attempt to transliterate Arabic words into Chinese. This meant that they needed Chinese equivalents for all the Islamic terminology. This situation was much dif-

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1   Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light: Wang Tai-yü's Great Learning of the Pure and Real and Liu Chih's Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

2   On this genealogy, see the study of Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005).

ferent from that of other languages, especially those that adopted the Arabic script, for those languages simply imported Arabic and Persian as needed—as we do in English.

The Chinese terminology that Ponachi and other Muslim scholars used would have been familiar to all educated Chinese, since they would have been conversant with the language of Neo-Confucianism, which had been the basis of the Chinese worldview for centuries and was presupposed in the examinations through which government officials were accepted and promoted. Western scholars call this school of thought "Neo" because, in contrast to early Confucianism, it borrows and adapts many concepts from Daoism and Buddhism.

I began translating Ponachi's book into English about five years ago. I am following the literal meaning of the Chinese terms as closely as I can. At the same time, I am trying to translate the terminology as it has been rendered into English by Western specialists on Chinese thought. As a result, the English text reads like a book on Chinese philosophy, which in fact it is. But, as soon as we juxtapose it with the Persian original, we see that it is also a thoroughly Islamic text.

In order to provide a sense of what Ponachi accomplished by translating this book into Chinese, I want to take a brief look at the first five sentences of the second flash in ʿIrāqī's text, which altogether has twenty-eight flashes. The first three sentences are prose, the second two are two lines of poetry. The sentences are these:

سلطان عشق خواست که خیمه به صحرا زند.

در خزاین بگشود. گنج بر عالم پاشید.

Sultan Love wanted to pitch His tent in the desert. He opened the door of the storehouses. He sprinkled the treasure on the cosmos.

In the first Flash, ʿIrāqī had explained that Love—which is the absolute, unbounded reality that underlies all reality—disclosed itself as lover and beloved and thereby established all dualities in the universe. Now, in the second Flash, ʿIrāqī is explaining how Love discloses Itself through the multiplicity of the universe.

In his commentary, Jāmī assumes that the reader already knows that "Sultan Love" means the beginningless and endless Essence of God, since this was explained in detail in the introductions and the first Flash. Hence he comments that the discussion here concerns the Essence understood as the Beloved, not as the unbounded, absolute reality, which transcends any sort of relation with anything else. This is because, "the Essence Itself has an equal relation with the existence and the nonexistence of the cosmos. It does not demand the existence of the cosmos, nor does It demand its nonexistence."

Ponachi translates "Sultan Love" as "the sovereign of Real Love." The word Real (*zhen* 眞) plays an especially important role in Chinese Islam. It is used to translate Arabic *ḥaqq* in its two main senses, that is, "real" as opposed to unreal, and "truth" as opposed to falsehood. It is also used as a modifier to show that something is thoroughly Islamic. One of the most common designations for the religion of Islam is "The Pure and the Real" (*qingzhen* 清眞). As a result, the word "Real" occurs much more often in the Chinese translations of Persian texts than does the word *ḥaqq* in the Persian originals. Ponachi's translation of "love" as "real love" is a good example.

In Jāmī's explanation, we meet several important technical terms, including "unboundedness" (*iṭlāq*), "Essence" (*dhāt*), "existence" (*wujūd*), and "nonexistence" (*ʿadam*). The translator needed Chinese equivalents for these words. Existence and nonexistence—or

being and nonbeing—are common terms in Chinese thought, so the difficult words here are *dhāt*, "Essence," and *iṭlāq*, "unboundedness" or "absoluteness," both of which are used frequently by Jāmī.

In Islamic thought the word *essence* is used to designate the thing in itself as contrasted with the thing's names and descriptions. In the case of God, the standard triad is Essence, attributes, and acts. The word "attributes" (*ṣifāt*) is a synonym for "names" (*asmāʾ*), both of which are commonplace in Islamic texts. But how should they be expressed in Chinese? For both attribute and name, Ponachi uses two Chinese characters to designate one Arabic word. For "names," he sometimes uses "names-and-colors" (*mingse* 名色) and sometimes "venerated names" (*zunming* 尊名). For "attributes" he uses "movements-and-stillnesses" (*dongjing* 動靜). In the ancient *Yijing*—"the Classic of Change" to which both Confucianism and Daoism look back—and in later Chinese thought, "movement and stillness" are used to designate all activity in the universe. The relation between the two is similar to that between *ḥaraka* and *sukūn* in Islamic texts. When Jāmī talks about God's "names and attributes," as he commonly does, the Chinese text typically has four characters, which I translate, for example, as "names-and-colors and movements-and-stillnesses."

As for God's Essence, it is unknowable by any but God Himself, which is why knowledge of Him is confined to His names and attributes. Jāmī explained this in the introduction. After translating Jāmī's explanation there, Ponachi made the comment that this is exactly what the Confucian scholars say when they draw a distinction between the Non-Ultimate (*wuji* 無極) and the Great Ultimate (*taiji* 太極), a well-known discussion in Neo-Confucianism.

As a Chinese equivalent for the word *dhāt*, Ponachi uses several different words. Most commonly he uses "suchness" (*ran* 然), though usually with a modifier, as in the expression "the root suchness" (*benran* 本然), which occurs 140 times in the text. Translators of Chinese texts often render "suchness" as "self-so." It means what a thing is in itself. It points to something that is undoubtedly there but is also ineffable and beyond. This is exactly what the word *dhāt* does in Arabic. Remember that *dhāt* is originally a pronoun, meaning "possessor of." Pronouns, as the Arabic grammarians tell us, "point" (*ishāra*) at something without telling us what the thing is. Hence when we talk about God's attributes, we are explaining the reality at which we are pointing. In this sense, the word *dhāt* means the same as the pronoun *huwa*, "He." Hence *huwiyya*, "he-ness," is a synonym for essence.

The next important term, *iṭlāq*, I am translating here as "unboundedness." Ponachi translates it as "penetration" (*tong* 通), a common philosophical term that suggests omnipresence—for example, the omnipresence of the Dao. This is the same sort of notion that can be understood from the Quranic verse *He is with you wherever you are* (57:4).

In the passage, Jāmī says that ʿIrāqī is looking at Love "in respect of belovedhood, not in respect of unboundedness." The Chinese reads, "from the level of Belovedhood, not from the station of the Penetrating Suchness." Jāmī then writes, "the Essence Itself has an equal relation with the existence and the nonexistence of the cosmos; It does not demand the existence of the cosmos, nor does It demand its nonexistence." Ponachi translates: "In respect of Itself, the Substance is equal relative to the being and nonbeing of the world; It searches neither for its being nor for its nonbeing." Here Ponachi translates essence as "substance" (*ti* 體), as he does in several other passages as well. Substance is one of the most common terms in Neo-Confucian thought. It designates the thing in

itself as contrasted with its "function" (*yong* 用). The pair, "substance and function," is used in much the same way as the Arabic pair "essence and attribute."

To come back to ʿIrāqī's first sentence, he said, **"Sultan Love wanted to pitch His tent in the desert."** Jāmī next explains that the "tent" which Love wanted to pitch was manifestation (*ẓuhūr*). And the "desert" in which Love pitched the tent was "the engendered beings" (*mukawwanāt*). The "engendered beings" are all the things that come into existence as a consequence of God's engendering command (*amr takwīnī*), which is His word "Be!" (*kun*). In other words, the engendered beings are all creatures.

Ponachi translates ʿIrāqī's sentence as "[Love] wanted to set up the curtain of the treasure of appearance in the great desert of the ten thousand images." "Ten thousand images" is a fine translation for "engendered beings." "Ten thousand" is a commonly used to refer to all created things, as in the common Chinese phrase "heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things." Muslims understood this phrase to be equivalent to the Quranic expression, "heaven, earth, and everything between the two." The idea that the ten thousand things are "images" (*xiang* 象) is often found in Chinese thought. After all, "manifestation" is the manifestation of something. To talk about phenomena is to say that there are noumena beyond the phenomena. In Quranic terms, everything is a "sign" of God, that is, an image pointing to the Real.

In the second sentence, ʿIrāqī says that the sultan of love **"opened the door of the storehouses."** Jāmī explains that these storehouses are the names and attributes, "for each name and attribute is like a storehouse within which pearls are hidden—that is, properties and traces—which become receptive to manifestation after they are entified."

In this sentence, "properties and traces"—*aḥkām wa āthār*—is a common expression that was used constantly by Ibn ʿArabī to refer to the manifestation of the names and attributes on the level of phenomenal things. The "property" of a thing is that which is proper to it or specific to it. In Quranic terms, the properties and traces are the "signs" of God. Hence the "names and attributes" are the universal realities that disclose God's Essence. The "properties and traces" are then the signs that display these names and attributes. Ponachi translates the two terms together as "tracks and traces" (*zongji* 蹤跡).

In Ponachi's version, ʿIrāqī's sentence along with Jāmī's explanation comes out like this: Love "opened up the various storehouses of the names-and-colors and the movements-and-stillnesses, for each of the names-and-colors and the movements-and-stillnesses is one treasure-place in which is contained the treasure of the tracks and traces that are revealed after manifestation."

In the third sentence, ʿIrāqī says, Sultan Love **"sprinkled the treasure on the cosmos."** In Jāmī's explanation, we run into another famous term made current by Ibn ʿArabī, namely *ʿayn thābita*, "fixed entity." Ponachi translates it as "subtle root" (*miaoben* 妙本). This translation demonstrates his excellent understanding of Arabic technical terminology. By the time of Jāmī, "fixed entity" was a common expression. Like Qūnawī and many others, Jāmī used it interchangeably with the philosophical term *māhiyya*, "quiddity" or "whatness."

According to Ibn ʿArabī, the fixed entities are the infinite things that are known forever in God's omniscience. They do not exist in themselves, only as they are known to God. They come into apparent existent when God says "Be" to them. Once they appear in the cosmos, they can be called "the

existent entities." These existent entities are precisely "the engendered beings," the result of the engendering command "Be!" Or, as Ponachi puts it, these existence entities are "the ten thousand images." But existence—*wujūd*—is strictly a divine attribute, so the existence of the entities is not real because they disappear. They are images of reality, not reality itself.

Ponachi was perfectly aware that "fixed entity" and "quiddity" are synonyms. Jāmī uses both terms throughout the text, and Ponachi translates both as "subtle root." "Subtle" (*miao* 妙) in Chinese thought designates the invisible, impalpable something that is perceived only through its tracks and traces. "Root" (*ben* 本) is an extremely common word in these texts, meaning the beginning and origin of things in the Real. Ponachi often uses it for emphasis, in the same way that he uses the word "Real" itself. In fact, he adds a comment in the introduction saying that one of the ways to refer to the reality of Existence is to call it "the Real Root" (*zhenben* 真本), an expression that he often uses in the translation, though it has no exact parallel in the Persian.

As for "subtle root," Ponachi provides his own definition of the term by saying "your subtle root is the substance of the Real Being related to your affairs." This is an excellent description of how the fixed entity, though nonexistent in itself, is the root of a thing in the Real Existence. In this respect Ibn ʿArabī sometimes calls the fixed entity "the specific face" (*al-wajh al-khāṣṣ*), meaning God's face—which is His Essence—inasmuch as it is looking at that specific entity.

Jāmī's explanation of the third sentence is as follows: "**He sprinkled the treasure**, that is, the treasure of the properties and traces of the names and attributes, **on the cosmos**, that is, on the fixed entities of the cosmos." Ponachi

translates it like this: Love "scattered the various traces of the treasure of these names-and-colors and movements-and-stillnesses over the subtle roots of the world."

The two lines of poetry are taken from one of the poems in ʿIrāqī's divan. They read:

چتر برداشت برکشید علم
تا به هم بر زند وجود و عدم
بی قراری عشق شورانگیز
شرّ و شوری فکند در عالم

He raised the parasol and lifted up the banner
to mix existence with nonexistence.
The unsettledness of tumult-inciting Love
threw evil and tumult into the world.

Jāmī explains each of the half-lines of the poem individually, so it is not completely clear that the four half-lines are in fact one poem. In commenting on the first half-line, he begins by explaining the appropriateness of the poem's imagery for a sultan. A parasol is raised over a sultan's head only when he comes out from his private residence to appear in public. But clearly the poem is about the relationship between existence and nonexistence, so Jāmī then offers an explanation in terms of the fixed entities, which are "nonexistent," as the texts tell us repeatedly.

So, Jāmī says, it may be that "what is meant by the 'parasol' is the fixed entities of the cosmos, and what is meant by 'raising' them is bringing them forth from the level of fixity in Knowledge to manifestation in entity." "Fixity in Knowledge" means, of course, existing as fixed entities in God's knowledge. Manifestation "in entity" (*dar ʿayn*) means in the existent entity, that is, in the outward world. But the "existent entity" and the "nonexistent entity" are the same thing. The only difference between the two is the manifestation of the existent entity to itself

and to others because of its engendered being, the result of the engendering command "Be!"

Ponachi's usual habit with poetry is to turn the lines into Chinese verses. In the resulting formal Chinese poems, the relation of the Chinese characters to the Persian words is often difficult to discern, though the overall sense of the poem is usually preserved. We know from the genealogy of the Huiru that Ponachi was taught the Chinese classics as a child and was already showing skill at recitation and literary composition by the time he was ten years old. He displays this skill in his translations of the many poems in the Persian text. This is in stark contrast to Liu Zhi, the scholar from the next generation who translated Jāmī's *Lawāʾiḥ* into Chinese. Liu Zhi usually dropped Jāmī's quatrains, even though they sum up the argument of the prose.

In translating the first half-line of the poem, Ponachi gives the gist of Jāmī's explanation of the raising of the parasol without bothering with the technical terms like "fixity" and "entity." He writes "The explanation may be this: The 'parasol' means the subtle roots of the ten thousand images. 'Opening' means making them ascend from the level of the Inward World to manifestation in the Outward World."

Jāmī continues: "For, when they come from the level of Knowledge to entity, the shadow of their properties and traces must fall upon the Outward of Existence; and the Outward of Existence becomes imbued with and curtained by these properties and traces, like the owner of the parasol in its shadow." Ponachi translates: "For, when they come from the inward to the outward, the hiddenness of the tracks and traces surely falls to the outward of the Real Being, and the outward receives the shade of the tracks and traces, just as the parasol's owner receives shade from it."

Next Jāmī says that when ʿIrāqī says, "lifted up the banner," the "banner" refers to the divine names. As for "lifting up," it means "conveying the names from the level of the potentiality of manifesting the traces to the level of the actuality." Ponachi's translates "lifting up the banner" as "raising the flag." Here he translates Jāmī's expression "the divine names" (*asmāʾ ilāhiyya*) as "the various names-and-colors of the Non-Seeking." Ponachi uses the expression "Non-Seeking" (*wuqiu* 無求) for the first time in translating the very first paragraph of Jāmī's theoretical introduction where Jāmī is explaining the difference between "the Necessary in Existence" (*wājib al-wujūd*) and "the possible thing" (*mumkin*). The Necessary in Existence is that which cannot not exist, and the possible thing may or may not exist, depending on the engendering command. Ponachi translates necessary as "non-seeking" and possible as "seeking" (*qiu* 求) or "beseeching" (*qi* 祈). The Quranic equivalent of *mumkin*, as Ibn ʿArabī sometimes remarks, is *faqīr*, poor and needy. So the "Non-Seeking" is the Necessary in existence. It is God who, in Quranic terms, is *ghanī ʿan al-ʿālamīn*, "unneedy of the worlds. Ponachi explains lifting up the banner like this:

"Flag" means the various names-and-colors of the Non-Seeking. "Raising" means sending these names-and-colors from the level in which tracks and traces are not manifest to the station of bright revelation so that they will be conforming with and contrary to each other.

The second half of the first line reads, **"to mix together existence and nonexistence."** Jāmī explains that Sultan Love mixed nonexistence, which consists of the fixed entities, with existence. This mixing is known to be there, but it is unknown how it came to be there. Ponachi translates: "The subtle roots are called 'nonbeing' because they exist in the Inward World but do not exist in the Outward

World. The allotted station of this blending is clear, but its rules are difficult to know."

Jāmī explains the second of the two verses like this: **"The unsettledness of tumult-inciting Love"** This means its lack of ease in the station of nonmanifestation, and the movement it shows toward the level of manifestation. **"threw tumult and evil into the world."** This is because, when the entities came from Knowledge to entity, contrarieties and clashes became manifest among their properties and traces. Contrariety and clash are the same as tumult. And every trace that is contrary to another trace and that clashes with it is evil [*sharr*] in relation to it. Ponachi's translation: Real Love's unsettledness brought about disturbance. This means that the Real Love moved from unsettledness in the station of hiddenness and faced the station of manifestation, starting to throw evil and disturbance into the world. For, when the various subtle roots came from the inward to the outward, some of their traces had to become manifest as mutual disobedience and mutual transgression. These two are nothing but "disturbance." In this respect each trace of mutual transgression is evil [*bushan* 不善].

Conclusion

In conclusion, these few examples show that Ponachi was an accomplished scholar, well-versed in both Chinese thought and Sufi theory of the fifteenth century. His interpretation of Jāmī's text offer an elegant understanding of Sufism's universal dimension, one of many factors that allowed Chinese Muslims to find themselves at home with two traditions that are too often seen as antagonistic.

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