

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Crossing boundaries: reading *Mirṣād al-‘ibād* in early modern China (redrawing and straddling borders)

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Abstract

The history of the accommodation of Najm al-Dīn Dāya’s Persian work, *Mirṣād al-‘ibād*, in China sheds light on an array of social and intellectual forces that redrew and straddled earlier boundaries and definitions of Chinese Islam between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. This essay focuses on three main effects that the introduction of *Mirṣād al-‘ibād* had on the historical trajectory of early modern Chinese Islamic scholarship. It begins by pointing to the ways in which the introduction of the *Mirṣād* contributed to the reshaping of the Chinese Islamic canon by giving Persian Ṣūfī theology a central place and the heated debate that the process entailed. It then examines the methodological dilemmas surrounding the appropriate methods with which to investigate and scrutinize this difficult text, and the variety of reading practices and methods of translation that scholars have applied to do so. Finally, the essay examines the diverse readings and interpretations that the Chinese translations of this text have generated.

Keywords: China; Islam; Persian; philology; Sufism; translation

Introduction

An unknown text in early sixteenth-century China, *Mirṣād al-‘ibād*, gained prominence by the turn of the seventeenth century as a foundational source of knowledge on Islamic mystical theology, philosophy of nature, and Persian rhetoric. The history behind the various forms of accommodation of this text in early modern China, and in particular the three aspects that this essay explores, spotlight an array of social and intellectual forces that redrew and straddled earlier boundaries and definitions. These forces came into existence by complementary, and often contradictory, vectors constructed by the limitations that are inherent to the importing of, and carrying out of scholarship on, Arabic and Persian texts and Islamicate knowledge in early modern China. Their forms and contents were, in many ways, shaped along the transformation of the local interpretation of Islamic belief and praxis, as well as by the various winds of change that prevailed within the broader intellectual community in early modern China. These aspects, when brought together, offer a fresh perspective on the nature of Islamic scholarship in pre-modern China, and, in particular, the anxiety that was felt among some of the traditional camps amid the arrival of new versions of Islam at the turn of the seventeenth century and the prospect of presenting their scholarship in Chinese. Moreover, they foreground the multipolar and pluralist nature of early modern China’s communities of Muslim scholars and practitioners.

Chinese Islamic textuality: a brief historical overview

The movement of Islamic texts into China is likely to have begun as early as the seventh or eighth centuries with the arrival of the first Muslims to the Middle Kingdom. An Arabic record from the

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tenth century gives the earliest account of such movement; it tells of a Chinese student who traveled to study under the physician and polymath Muḥammad b. Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī (d. ca. 925). Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī's student decided to copy, and take back to China, texts from the Galenic corpus, most likely, in their Arabic rendition.¹ Around the same time, Chinese official histories started to take notice of Muhammad and his religion and include short reports on the Umayyad and Abbasid states.

The Mongol conquest of Asia in the thirteenth century, however, and its dramatic transformation of the socio-cultural fabric of large parts of Asia, facilitated an extensive movement of peoples, texts, materials, and ideas. Arabic and Persian texts arrived at the Chinese court with experts in the astral sciences, medicine, pharmaceuticals, and military engineering, introducing the advancements of the sciences in the Islamic world. Special bureaus tasked with the accommodation of Arabo-Persian knowledge, equipped with rich libraries, were established at the Yuan court, ushering in a period of extensive inter-Asian exchanges of knowledge. The movement of populations under the Mongols also contributed to the significant growth of Muslim communities in major Chinese inland hubs, such as the cities of Xi'an and Kaifeng, and in coastal cities, such as Quanzhou and Guangzhou. These communities housed Muslims from different parts of the world who arrived in China as soldiers, bureaucrats, or merchants traveling on global trade routes.² It is likely that the religious lives in such communities involved Arabo-Persian texts, housed in mosques, community-schools, or the offices of Muslim community judges. Such texts included manuscripts of the Qur'an, Quranic commentaries, collections of prophetic traditions, and works pertaining to Islamic jurisprudence.

The demise of the Mongols in the middle of the fourteenth century, after a century of rule over China, and the establishment of the Ming dynasty in 1368, brought about changes to the socio-cultural composition of China. In particular, the number of Arabic and Persian speakers at the service of the newly established court was far more limited than before. As a result, by the 1380s, the first emperor of the Ming launched a series of reforms that aimed to provide better access to designated branches of Arabo-Persian knowledge at the Chinese court. The recruitment of Arabic and Persian speakers from communities around China to serve at the imperial bureaus, alongside a translation project that translated Arabo-Persian scientific texts into Chinese, were the major components of these reforms. These reforms resulted in better access to selected branches of applicable knowledge, newly available in Chinese, yet at the same time they disengaged China from the intellectual and scientific developments that were at the center of scholarship in other parts of the Islamic world.

Somewhat similarly to the process that saw the naturalization of scientific knowledge at court, Muslim communities during the Ming became much more rooted in their Chinese environments than their predecessors did under the Yuan. Donald Leslie perceptively defined this socio-cultural transformation as a transition from the provisional identity of "Muslims in China" to the permanent one of "Chinese-Muslims."³ Chinese-Muslim religious culture was now sublimated into a local version of Islamic culture. One of the most salient aspects of this localized form of Islam was the limited access of its followers to Arabic and Persian languages. Religious knowledge was in many cases confined to a blind memorization of Qur'anic verses with some vague sense of the meaning and the accurate Arabic pronunciation.⁴ Arabic and Persian manuscripts, vestiges of the rich libraries of the Yuan, mostly vanished without trace, with a few finding their way to private libraries and bookshops throughout China. New articulations of Islamic religiosity and a refreshed interest in Arabic and Persian texts then reappeared in the mid-sixteenth century. Waves of new texts, arriving with

¹Weil (2023, p. 696).

²On the history of Muslims in China during the Yuan, see Leslie (1986), Rossabi (1981), Rossabi (2014) and Dillon (1999).

³Leslie (1998, p. 27). This is the place to mention that this essay focuses on Chinese-Muslim communities that live within the hinterland of China and are often referred to as Hui. With the significant changes in the social and religious landscape in China after the mid-eighteenth century, additional Islamic communities came under Chinese rule that differed from the Hui in their culture, language, and forms of religiosity. These other communities will not be discussed in this essay. For discussion on the Uyghur textuality, see Thum (2014).

⁴Versions of this form of blind memorization of the Qur'an perpetuated to the present day in the genre of *haitie* 亥帖 or *haiting* 亥聽. This genre transcribed the verses of the Qur'an in Chinese characters.

incoming Central Asian visitors and missionaries, ushered in a new phase in the history of Islamic textuality in China.⁵

In the mid-sixteenth century, Hu Dengzhou 胡登州 (1522–1597), a Chinese–Muslim from the northern province of Shaanxi, had a vision to promote a systematic study of Arabic and Persian texts in China. Hu’s biography, composed by his seventeenth-century follower, Zhao Can 趙燦 (1662–1722), suggests that Hu’s enthusiasm emerged after he happened to a Westerner in Beijing, who introduced him to an Arabic manuscript of Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim al-Ḥarīrī’s (d. 1122) *Maqāmāt* (Book of Odes), which he held in his possession. Hu was fascinated by the contents and style of the Arabic text. He thereby decided to set up a school in his hometown and gather a few interested students, who later went on to establish their own schools. Hu’s vision was expanded by his students into an empire-wide network of schools and scholars, dedicated to the teaching of Arabic and Persian texts. Despite their shared roots and mission, schools and scholars differed in their curricula. Some prioritized Arabic over Persian, others chose mystical texts over legal or dogmatic works. Differing in their pedagogical and heuristic approaches to Islamic texts, and bearing different objectives and audiences in mind, Chinese Islamic scholars varied in their scholarly practices. They used a wide range of methods to carry out their scholarship from oral instruction on how to read texts in their original languages to the publication of full translations in classical Chinese.⁶ Accordingly, Chinese Islamic scholarship, as it was developed and taught in this empire-wide network of schools at least up to the early nineteenth century, manifested, to a great extent, the individual inclinations of the individual scholars and the archives they had set up.

Re-shaping the Chinese Islamic canon: straddling between tradition and novelty

The introduction of *Mirṣād al-’ibād* to China was part of a larger transformation that Islamic scholarship in China underwent from the sixteenth century onwards. The wide circulation of this text, one of the earliest systematic treatises on Ṣūfī theology written in Persian, in China marks the departure from a traditional Mosque education that concentrated on memorization of the Qur’an and some knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and traditions, and the rise of a critical, rich Chinese Islamic scholarship, in which Persian Ṣūfī theological texts received a central place. The study of the *Mirṣād* in China and its subsequent translations into Chinese represent an important departure from the focus on Arabic-based texts on Islamic jurisprudence, Quranic sciences, and Hadith traditions and more mainstream forms of *Kalām* theology and Islamic creed. It marks a growing interest among early modern Chinese Islamic scholars in Persian Ṣūfism. The rise in the number of Persian Ṣūfī texts did not only introduce a new language and religious discourse to Chinese–Muslims, but it also proposed a new, far more individually practiced, and at the same time globally aspired, mode of Islam. The acceptance of these Persian texts, including the *Mirṣād*, into the Chinese Islamic teaching curricula transformed the overall nature of Chinese Islamic scholarship from the seventeenth century onwards. It strengthened its philosophical and metaphysical dimensions and, at the same time, constructed intellectual bridges between scholarship in other parts of the Islamicate and, in turn, the global early modern world.

Composed around 1221 in Persian by the Kubravī Ṣūfī master Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (1177–1256, commonly known as “Dāya”) amid the Mongol invasion of Central Asia and on the eve of their sacking of Western Asia, *Mirṣād al-’ibād min al-mabda’ ila al-ma’ād* (“The Path of God’s Bondsmen from Origin to Return,” thereafter *Mirṣād*) gained popularity throughout the Islamicate world as a central piece of Islamic mystical theology in Persian.⁷ Fleeing the Mongol sacking of cities and centers of scholarship

⁵For a more detailed account of the various phases in the history of China’s Islamic textuality, Weil (2016a), Tatsuya (2013), and Petersen (2018). From the eighteenth century onwards, various Sufi orders were established throughout northern China. Their religiosity and textual archives differed to some degree from those in local schools and local communities. This essay will focus on the latter case. For accounts on the former case, see Sobieroj (2014) and Ha (2022).

⁶On the various schools, see Ben-Dor Benite (2005) and Weil (2016b).

⁷This translation is given by Hamid Algar in his English translation of the work. The comprehensive introduction to that translation helps to situate the composition of the work in the context of the dispersion of the Kubrawi school of Sufism amid

in Central Asia, Najm al-Dīn Dāya sought to rescue from oblivion the teachings of his mentors and, in particular, the mystical program of his teacher and founder of the Kubravī order, Najm al-Dīn Kubra (1145–1221). In five parts and forty chapters, the text of the *Mirṣād* provides an early attempt to systematize and explain the mystical program of his Ṣūfī mentors. It provides for the reader accounts of the Ṣūfī cosmogenetical and anthrogenetical frameworks and also charts the multiple realms of divine dominion and the various conditions of the human soul. It also presents the ways by which the self and society could be edified.

The choice to depart from the norm of writing Islamic theology in Arabic and using Persian as the idiom of the work came about, as Dāya suggests in the text itself, as a response to the need and aspiration of his peers to vernacularize and localize theological guidance. Dāya grounded this linguistic decision on a Qur’anic saying which proclaimed that God sent multiple messengers to explain His message across the different tongues.⁸ Dāya’s linguistic decision reflected a far broader issue that emerged alongside the transmission of Islamic knowledge and texts beyond the boundaries of the Arabic-speaking world – the importance of the message rather than its linguistic vehicle. Furthermore, this decision seems to align with a fundamental aspect of Dāya’s Ṣūfī teaching, that is his aim to break away from the socially and intellectually restrictive nature of Islamic jurisprudence and *kalām* theology and the forms of exclusion that traditional madrasa education produced and make faith and gnosis accessible to the individual practitioner whatever background he has. Dāya’s decision mirrored an issue that transcends the relationship between Arabic and Persian and pertains to the legitimacy as well as the duty to translate theological works into the vernaculars that would be graspable to the individual practitioner, whatever intellectual background he might possess. In hindsight, Dāya’s linguistic choice had consequences for the transmission of Islamic texts and praxis in China among other places on at least three levels: firstly, it paved the way for others to write in Persian and consequently generated a critical mass of Persian theological texts that found their way also into China; secondly, it privileged the message rather than the language by which it is represented and thus provided sufficient justification for further translation of Islamic texts into local languages, such as Chinese; and, finally, the use of vernacular language implied the placement of the individual and his understanding as the epicenter of learning and scholarship, curtailing to a great extent the need for educational and religious institutions.

Dāya’s linguistic choice, and his recognition of the polyglot nature of the Islamic world, still resonated in Chinese Islamic scholarship almost half a millennium after his death. Jiang Chunhua 蔣春華, for example, who produced in 1891 the first printed edition of a Chinese translation of the *Mirṣād*, justified the translation of the Persian text into Chinese by asserting that the linguistic medium is of lesser importance than the message and that an individual has the capacity to grasp the text’s contents without a need for institutional intermediacy. Jiang writes, “it is a pity that the language [of the *Mirṣād*] is foreign and peculiar, leading to vagueness of meaning (*yili* 義理) and obstruction of morality (*daode* 道德)... It [the *Mirṣād*] discusses the acknowledgment of God, and thus exhausts the nuances of the singularity [of the divine]; it discusses personal conduct, and thus describes the sources of the Three Worlds [i.e., Past, Present and Future]. [These discussions are presented] in a well-demonstrated and impartial way. In brief, it [the *Mirṣād*] urges people to acknowledge God and transform themselves with every breath. If so performed, no action is immoral and no person is not a devotee.”⁹ This vernacularization fits well into the framework of Ṣūfī ideology that broke away from the socially and intellectually restrictive nature of Islamic jurisprudence and *kalām* theology and

the Mongol invasion of Central and Western Asia. As Algar explains, the Persian text exists in two separate recensions, and both go back to Persian versions composed by Dāya in 1221 and 1223. See Algar (1982).

⁸See Qur’an 14:4 “wa-mā arsalnā min rasūlin illā bi-lisāni qawmihi li-yubayyina lahum” (Arberry’s 1955 translation: “And We have sent no Messenger save with the tongue of his people, that he might make all clear to them.”) Chapter 2 of Part 1 in the *Mirṣād* opens with this Qur’anic saying to explain the reason for choosing to write the work in Persian. See Algar (1982, p. 38).

⁹GZYDYY, 16:337.

the form of exclusion that traditional madrasa education produced and aimed to make faith and gnosis accessible to the individual practitioner in his or her local dwelling.

The enduring popularity of *Mirṣād al-‘ibād* throughout Central and Western Asia centuries after its compilation could potentially explain its arrival in China during the sixteenth century. Yet, it was the new form of scholarship that emerged in the mid-sixteenth century in Northern China, and which promoted a systematic study of a form of Arabo-Persian literacy, that in many ways paved the way for the accommodation of the *Mirṣād* in China. This scholarship has its roots in the aspiration of Hu Dengzhou to develop a systematic pedagogy that would train local students in reading selected Arabic and Persian texts and gaining insights into their nuanced contents and styles.¹⁰ Hu’s disciples expanded the program to the various ends of China, producing an empire-wide network of Islamic textual scholarship. Arabic grammar, Islamic jurisprudence, and theology were the main pillars of these schools’ curricula, yet differences in the corpuses of texts and the intellectual foci of individual masters divided the schools.

A chronicle of Chinese-Islamic schools in Hu Dengzhou’s network up to the 1670s titled *Jingxue xi chuanpu* 經學系傳譜 (“The Genealogy of Classical Learning,” hereafter *JXXCP*) records a story on the introduction of the *Mirṣād* text to Feng Bo’an 馮伯菴 (fl. late sixteenth–early seventeenth century), a Chinese–Muslim master that taught in Menghua 蒙化 (in today’s Yunnan province) and later in Tongxin 同心 (in today’s Ningxia province). While in Yunnan, a certain local Muslim literatus showed Feng a manuscript from his late grandfather’s library and asked his assistance in deciphering its contents. The chronicle tells us that Feng was astonished by the discovery of this remarkable Persian text that he had never seen before and that “was unknown in China at the time.”¹¹ Feng later incorporated the *Mirṣād* in his teaching curricula along with other newly discovered texts with mystical dimensions, such as Sa’dī’s *Gulistān*.¹²

Another story recorded in the same chronicle displays the difficulty that readers of the *Mirṣād* experienced. Ma Minglong 馬明龍, a disciple of Feng Bo’an who later became a master in Jiangxia 江夏 (today’s Hubei province), studied the text with his master, Feng. During this time, he happened on a wondering turbaned foreigner called Ji-liao-li 極料理 (maybe from Jilālī).¹³ The foreigner was intrigued by Ma’s reading of the *Mirṣād*. As Ma admittedly experienced difficulties in understanding the contents and the unique vocabulary of the text, the foreigner introduced him to a dictionary called *Furs*, which included elaborate explanations on the various terms and concepts he encountered in reading the *Mirṣād*. Ma was later one of the translators of the Persian text into Chinese.

The inclusion of the *Mirṣād* in schools’ curricula was a part of an increasing interest in Persian texts and in mystical theology among some scholars. By the mid-seventeenth century, a few generations after the death of Hu, some Chinese–Muslims scholars in region of Shandong called from the expansion of the curricula to include more Persian texts and, in particular, to give greater attention to Sūfī theology. Proponents of this school, often labeled as the “Shandong school” (*Shandong pai* 山東派), included in their teaching curricula Persian works with mystical inclinations, such as Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī’s (d. 1273 AD) *Mathnawī*, ‘Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī’s (fl. 13th cen.) *Maqṣad al-aqṣa*, Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī’s (d. 1492) *Lawā’ih* and *Ashī‘at al-lama‘āt*, as well as Najm al-Dīn Dāya’s *Mirṣād al-ibād*. A prominent scholar of that school, Chang Zhimei 常志美 (d. ca. 1683), enthusiastically advocated for the inclusion of Persian texts and compiled several textbooks to facilitate the use of Persian. His compilations include a primer for mastering Persian grammar, known by its Persian title *Minhāj al-ṭalab* (“Program of Study”), completed in 1656. In the appended preface and epilogue to this work, Chang Zhimei provided some insight into the heated debates among Chinese–Muslims about the teaching of Persian and the inclusion of Persian texts in the curricula, suggesting that although Persian texts were available, there were scholars who criticized Chang’s

¹⁰On Hu Dengzhou’s network and its pedagogy, see Ben-Dor Benite (2005) and Weil (2016a, pp. 36–60).

¹¹*JXXCP*, 34.

¹²For more on these records, see Weil (2016b).

¹³*JXXCP*, 45.

attempt to provide systematic teaching of the language.¹⁴ Opposition to the study of mysticism is recorded on a number of steles that provide lists of authoritative texts, mainly concentrating on mainstream Ḥanafī jurisprudence and *taqlīd* works.¹⁵ In addition, the chronicles of Beijing Niujiē mosque includes a description on the opposition to Chang Zhimei's teaching from among the scholars of the local Muslim community.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Chang's project bore significant fruit and his collaborators and disciples were eventually able to expand the Chinese Islamic canon and place Persian texts, especially those on Ṣūfī theology, including *Mirṣād al-'ibād*, at its core. Chang's students, in particular She Yunshan 舍雲善 and Wu Zunqi 伍遵契, were instrumental in promoting the study of Persian texts and produced translations into Chinese of the *Mirṣād* and other Persian works (about that see below). She Yunshan was instrumental in developing a systematic curriculum that also incorporated the study of mystical theology. The curriculum was designed around a pedagogy in which a student gradually moved to more difficult texts and themes as he developed linguistic and rhetorical skills. The text of the *Mirṣād* in She's curriculum served both to introduce Persian rhetoric (*Fa'erxi zhi wenfeng* 法而西之文風),¹⁷ together with other works such as Jāmi's *Ashī'at al-lama'āt* and Nasafī's *Maqṣad al-aqṣa*, as an introduction to the discourse on what they called the "Islamic cultivation of the Way" (*xiudao* 修道) and study of "Human Nature and cosmic Principles" (*xingli* 性理 or *xingming lixue* 性命理學).¹⁸

Accordingly, the introduction of *Mirṣād al-'ibād* into the Chinese Islamic curricula brings to light the various trends among Chinese-Muslims in shaping their educational programs and scholarly canon. The inclusion of *Mirṣād* and other Ṣūfī Persian texts into the curricula represents a transitional moment in the history of Chinese Islam, in which the boundaries of early modern Chinese Islamic scholarship were negotiated and re-drawn to include further emphasis on Ṣūfī theology and Persian texts.

Re-articulating the *Mirṣād*: straddling between forms of scholarship

Making sense of the contents of *Mirṣād al-'ibād* involved straddling an adherence to its language and an explication of its meaning. This situation prompted some to apply various textual devices to read and interpret the original Persian text in its manuscript form, and others to find ways to put across its meaning in an accessible way to the wider community of Chinese readers. These varied forms of readership entailed not only technical matters but also represented significant differences in the nature of Chinese Islamic scholarship; the former, relying on a close Master–Disciple tutoring. It involved the student's copying of a manuscript, in accordance with the Master's lecture, marking on it the grammatical parsing of sentences, explanations of difficult passages and terms, and inter-textual links. By contrast, the latter included the reading of a translated work in Chinese. It represents a far more independent form of scholarship which mainly relied on the reader's Chinese literacy and educational background.¹⁹ In many ways, these two forms of readership represented a contestation between two ideological camps: the philologists and the philosophers. The former advocated the study of Islamic texts in their original language, privileging philological scrutiny over philosophical expositions; the latter viewed meanings as the goal of scholarship and aspired to convey meaning in a way that could be grasped even by those who did not possess the linguistic competency to read texts in their original language.²⁰ Straddling these two positions, Chinese-Muslim scholars

¹⁴On Chang Zhimei's biography, see Kauz (2010, pp. 91–113).

¹⁵On such steles, see Takashi et als. (2012, pp. 223–88) and Huart (1905, pp. 261–320).

¹⁶*Gangzhi*, 45–50.

¹⁷*JXXCP*, 20

¹⁸*JXXCP*, 87 and 90.

¹⁹On the early translations of Chinese Islamic texts into Chinese, see Murata et al. (2009) and Frankel (2011). On the case of the translation of works of the Persian poet Jāmi, see Shen (2021).

²⁰On this see Weil (2022). The contestation between philologists and philosophers is an important facet of the Chinese intellectual discourses of the Qing dynasty. As Elman demonstrated, a move from a philosophical approach to the Confucian classics to a more philological was part of the Evidential Learning (*kaozheng* 考證) movement in the seventeenth

produced reading practices and translation methods that led subsequent Chinese Islamic scholarship in two different, yet often complementary, directions.

Intrigued by the complexity of the vocabulary, grammar, and conceptual framework of the *Mirṣād*, Chinese-Muslims delved into the text through a web of annotation devices. Copies of the *Mirṣād*, such as the one held by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF),²¹ provide a visual image of the various methods of reading the text as they were interwoven into dense interlinear and marginal notes. The BNF manuscript carries the Chinese title “道行推原經” on its inner cover page. The same title, written in *xiao'er jing* 小兒經 script (Chinese written in Arabic script), appears also on folio 216v, toward the end of the manuscript. Throughout the manuscript, the Persian main text is annotated with interlinear glosses and marginalia. These glosses give the Chinese translation of selected terms in Chinese characters, *xiao'er jing* or a combination of the two; or, alternatively, those which are prefaced with the Persian *ay* “that is,” provide a Persian synonym or a short interpretation in Persian of a word. These glosses, arguably, replicate the master’s interpretation of the text. Markers in form of Arabic acronyms of grammatical terms are placed under selected words to indicate their grammatical function in the sentence – representing both the master’s lectured grammatical analysis of the text and the reader’s technique to facilitate his individual reading and comprehension of this complicated text. Longer passages on the margins include Chinese translations of entire phrases or sentences; or, at times, serve as a critical apparatus to compare versions of the text and indicate omissions or errors in the current manuscript. These annotations and marking provide a glimpse into the classroom work around the reading of the *Mirṣād* that took place in China during the seventeenth century. They enact the articulation of the text as it was lectured by the Chinese master in front of his disciples. It is not difficult to imagine that masters and disciples gathered their notes and glosses together into a coherent scheme of the text – one that could amount to a Chinese translation of portions of the text.

At least two translations of the *Mirṣād* are known to have widely circulated in China during the seventeenth century, presenting the contents of the text to local audiences.²² The earlier one seems to have been produced during the 1660s by Ma Minglong 馬明龍 (1596–1678) and his colleague She Yunshan 舍蘊善 (1634–1710).²³ As mentioned above, the two were important masters in Hu Dengzhou’s network and included the *Mirṣād* in their teaching curricula. This translation is mentioned in *JXXCP* with the given title *Tuiyuan zhengda* 推原正達 (“Investigation of the Origin and Correct Apprehension”). A manuscript of a fragmentary translation of the *Mirṣād* that carries a title that resembles *Tuiyuan zhengda* is housed in the oriental manuscript collection at Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO), Paris.²⁴ The translation, as it appears in the INALCO manuscript, demonstrates a clear inclination toward literal and vernacular (strong presence of a northern dialect) transcription, to the extent that this translation is not necessarily comprehensible to readers of Chinese who are not familiar with the local dialect. The translators seem to attempt to retain the original word order and provide word-for-word translation. To account for Persian morphology and syntactical patterns, the translators employed Chinese words that were taken out of their common usage. For example, the term *zhu* 諸 (“various”) is used to mark plural nouns, the verbal compound *zhuande* 轉的 (“turning”) is used to mark the causative alteration of

and eighteenth centuries. See Elman (1984). It should be noted, however, that the movement among Chinese-Islam is in the opposite direction, moving from a philological scrutiny of Arabic and Persian texts to a focus on conveying philosophical ideas in Chinese.

²¹al-Rāzī, *Mirṣād al-‘ibād* (Manuscript Supplément persan 2071 at BNF).

²²In regard to “widely circulating,” I refer here to those translated copies, of which copies are extant in libraries around the world. It is likely that additional translations and glosses for personal use also existed.

²³Yang Xiaochun suggests that Ma Minglong and She Yunshan produced separate translations of the *Mirṣād*, both carrying the same title of “*Tuiyuan zhengda*.” See Yang (2010, p. 157).

²⁴The title on the external cover page of the manuscript is *Tuiyuan Zhengkui* 推原正達. The last character is rare in use, but sufficiently close graphically to *da* 達 and therefore might be a scribal error. *Tui-yuan zheng-kui* (Manuscript MS. Chi.843 at BULAC).

verbs, and the non-existing Chinese pattern *fei* 非...*suiran* 雖然 is used to translate the Arabic pattern *mā kāna...wa-lākin* “not...but.”

The vernacular nature of this translation supports the conclusion that it was gathered from notes and glosses that masters delivered orally. Some support for this idea comes from the account on the production of She Yunshan’s translation in *JXXCP*. According to the biography of She Yunshan, several of She’s students who were educated in Confucian schools and showed interest in Islamic mysticism, yet lacked the required linguistic abilities, motivated him to compile Chinese glosses (*yi shuzi yi* 以書字譯) for several texts, including *Lama’at* (which he titled *Zhaoyuan mijue* 昭元秘訣 “The Secrets of the Flashes”), *Maqṣad al-aqṣá* (titled *Guizhen biyao* 歸真必要 “The Prerequisites for Submission to the Truth”), and the *Mirṣād*. She’s translation of the *Mirṣād*, we are told, covered the entire Persian text, and did not omit even the embedded four-line poetic verses.

A second translation, written in far more elegant Chinese, was made by the Nanjing-based Wu Zunqi 伍遵契 (ca. 1598–1698) between 1672 and 1678 under the title *Guizhen yaodao* 歸真要道 (“The essential way to submit to the Truth”). This translation circulated fairly widely among Chinese–Muslim scholars in manuscript form, arguably due to the translator’s opposition to print. It was only published in print in 1891 by Jiang Chunhua 蔣春華.²⁵

The existing editions of this translation preserve some of the prefaces to the translation written by the translator and other contemporary scholars, as well as important Editorial Notes (*fanli* 凡例) in which the translator and the editors²⁶ give account of their methodologies. In Wu Zunqi’s preface to his translation, he provides some insights into his view of the importance of the *Mirṣād* and the reasons for undertaking its translation. Wu writes:

Out of his compassion and pity, the True Lord sent to the world the Prophet Muhammad to summarize the programs of previous sages. He sent down the True Scripture, “The Qur’an”, to show the guidelines of knowledge and action. He entrusted the Angels to deliver his scripture in total of 6666 segments, explicating the mysterious workings of existence and explaining the profound principles of man and objects. Scholars have truthfully studied it to grasp every detail, eliminate any confusion and obtain attestations of its utmost truth. Yet, its text is profound and its meaning extensive, and readers had difficulties to reconcile their different understanding. The ancient sage Abū Bakr, summarized and commented on the scriptures. He divided his work into five parts and 40 chapters, and titled it “*Mirṣād*”, or in Chinese, “The essential way to submit to the Truth”. It focuses on the constituents of Nature, the grounds for Life and Death, the source of creation of Man and things, as well as how to accomplish the purification of the mind, the nurturing of nature, and a thorough investigation of auspices. All of these matters are included [in this book]. It derives its meanings from the True Scripture, yet its discourse is far more concise. Reading this writing and concentrating on its obscurities is no different from reading the True Scripture and extensively studying its text.²⁷

真主惻然憫之，於是鍾生至聖穆罕默德，以綜前聖之謨，降真經古而阿納，以示知行之準，而其經之降也，使天仙嗣續以付之，計六千六百六十六段，晰有無之玄機，闡人物之側，學者誠披讀以會其微。即可無事紛求，而得歸證其至真。然其文深其義博 讀者猶難相悅以解。有先賢額補自克而者，引其經中要略而直疏之，分為五門四十篇，名曰米而撒德，華言歸真要道也。其中性命之微，死生之原，處造物之原，以及清心養性之功，窮幾知化之學，無不備載，義本真經而其詞較約焉。讀是集而精求其奧，不異讀真經而廣習其文也。

²⁵On the available editions of this translation, see Min and Ding (2015, pp. 86–90).

²⁶The 1890 *Nian yizhai* 念一齋 edition and its twentieth century reprints include the original editorial notes by Wu Zunqi with interlinear additions in smaller font by Jiang Chunhua 蔣春華 who edited the text and added commentary in 1890. Within this essay, I have omitted the latter’s editions to the editorial notes.

²⁷*GZYDYY*, 16:340.

The editorial notes provide some further explanations of the methods of translation. The notes suggest that potential readers who showed interest in the contents of the *Mirṣād*, but did not possess the necessary linguistic skills, were Wu's motivation to compile such a translation that could introduce the contents of the Persian work in Chinese. Such a Chinese translation, Wu suggests, can be compared with the move to write theology in Persian, rather than in Arabic. He borrows this line of reasoning and its Qur'anic references for the second chapter of the *Mirṣād* that presents Najm al-dīn Dāya's own justification for writing the text in Persian. Wu writes:

The language and meanings in this work are nuance and its thought delves into the roots and origins. Hence, it serves as an important text of this enlightened teaching regarding the utmost essence of returning to the Truth. As some readers have the ambition to seek [the truth] but are not able to learn and practice it, I have therefore translated it into Chinese. This is like the various Arabic scriptures that have been translated and commented on using the Persian language and scripts as they were transmitted into the Persianate world (*fa-er-xi guo* 法而西國). Just as God ordered: "I do not merely send a prophet, but according to the tongue of his native place, so that he could make clear to them [the local people]". I follow here the same enlightened precept, translating the main meaning (*dazhi* 大旨); those who wish further detail, should look at the original text.²⁸

此經文義精微，理徹根源，乃明教大本，歸真至要，惟念有志尋求，而不能習學者，故以漢字譯之。即如阿而畢諸經，傳到法而西國來，必按法而西的文字翻譯註解，相合主上勅諭：“我不差一聖則已，但差必按他教生的鄉音，因便解明與他們。”今亦遵此明條，譯其大旨，欲求詳細，須讀原經。

Moreover, the editorial notes provide an account of the translation methodology and major issues that Wu faced when producing his eloquent translation. The major issues were how to present divine attributes using available vocabulary which mainly served to designate human beings. Here, Wu asserts that whilst divine attributes "cannot be described in speech or in writing," that he decided to use human terminology in order "to allow easy grasp." However, he warns his readers "not to be wrongly immersed in these terms and phrases," nor to assume that "the miraculous God has any form or image."²⁹ He points to the difficulty in translating certain fundamental concepts such as Allāh, *islām*, and *īmān*, and suggests the Chinese terms *ming* 命 for the Arabic *rūḥ* and *xing* 性 for *nafs*. Personal names and place names were transliterated in Chinese characters, yet the use of a single or double underline was used to inform the reader that the marked string of characters represented sounds rather than meanings.

The project of translating the *Mirṣād* into Chinese was, overall, welcomed by Chinese-Muslim scholars. Such translation was seen as a way in which to introduce Islamic scholarship beyond the walls of the local schools and among non-Muslim Chinese. Ma Shizhang 馬士章, a Chinese-Muslim, praised Wu Zunqi's translation, explaining that in seventeenth-century China "the world is not well acquainted with the fundamentals of Islam, because those who read Chinese are not versed in the meanings of Islamic texts and those who are versed in the meanings of Islamic texts cannot read Chinese."³⁰ Sha Bing 沙炳, in his preface to Wu Zunqi's translation, described that the underlying fear behind this translation project was Wu Zunqi's fear that the philosophy of the Persian *Mirṣād* was difficult to grasp, and so, with some hesitation, he decided to translate the original text into Chinese. This translation, Sha suggests, was later further polished by Chinese literati who skillfully produced a more elegant translation.³¹

²⁸GZYDYY, 16:342.

²⁹GZYDYY, 16:342.

³⁰GZYDYY, 16:339.

³¹GZYDYY, 16:338.

Straddling the Persian and Chinese articulations of the *Mirṣād*, Chinese-Muslims scholars attempted to put across the various profound insights that Najm al-Dīn Dāya's text offered. Choosing the appropriate methods to investigate and scrutinize this difficult text, as well as the ways to present the outcomes of their scholarship, prompted Chinese-Muslim scholars to apply different reading practices and methods of translation. As a result, readers from different backgrounds could access the text of the *Mirṣād* and, as will be presented in the next section, interpret it in different ways.

Reading the *Mirṣād* in Chinese: straddling between discourses

What did an early modern Chinese reader make of the translations of the *Mirṣād*? Reading the text of *Mirṣād al-'ibād* in Chinese through differing prisms of individual backgrounds and interests, and straddling its Islamic context and universal significance, produced very different takes on the contents and meanings of the text. Such readings are well displayed in the preface appended to the published Chinese translation of the *Mirṣād*, as well as in references to, and citations and quotations of, the *Mirṣād al-'ibād* in other Chinese works. Moreover, these diverse readings of the text display how Chinese-Muslim scholars straddled the borders of Islamic theology, philosophy of nature, and history in their efforts to make sense of, and relate to, the *Mirṣād*.

Three main readings of the *Mirṣād* appear in the writing of early modern Chinese-Muslims. One reading took the *Mirṣād* to represent the personal experiences of historical actors which needed to be passed on to later generations; another saw the text as an exposition on the structure and operation of the natural world, analyzing the theories and concepts it introduces; the third used it as a pathway to the practitioner. These three readings represent, in many ways, three dimensions of early modern Chinese Islamic scholarship and the wide intellectual space it covered, spanning the discourses of Islamic praxis, Islamic law, philosophy of nature, and world history.

In his contributed preface to Wu Zunqi's Chinese translation produced around 1678, Sha Bing 沙炳, a Chinese-Muslim scholar from the metropolitan city of Nanjing, described the text as a summary of insights into nature and human existence that people in the past grasped through experience. He writes, "The ancients embraced in their bosoms what they witnessed. They wrote books and established theories to pass it on and teach later generations. By reading their books, later generations could hear that which they had not heard before and witness that which they had not witnessed. That is what is called perpetuity. The Chinese Islamic [book] 'The Essential Way to Submit to the Truth' is that type of a book."³² The text of the *Mirṣād*, according to Sha, is therefore an accumulation of experiences that are worthy of being transmitted to later generations. The significance of this accumulated knowledge lies in an underlying conviction that the unitary divine is the source of nature and human existence. As Sha writes, "this book on the Submission to Truth focuses on the thorough investigation of Principles and the utmost fulfillment of Human Nature. The Universal Principles, however, cannot be thoroughly investigated without acknowledging the One as their emanating source.... This [book] hence discusses these matters with great familiarity and reads them with great clarity. Its thorough investigation of Principles could not be more refined."³³ Sha explains that the text of the *Mirṣād* provides insights into the fundamentals of human existence and moral society, and for that reason Wu Zunqi undertook the translation of the work into Chinese in order to introduce these experiences and accumulated knowledge to China.

For some readers, the *Mirṣād* provided an authoritative program for those who wanted to practice Islam. It provided theoretical grounds for grasping Islamic theology and was taken as an authority on proper practice. Yuan Ruqi 袁汝綺, a prominent Chinese-Muslim scholar from Nanjing, highly valued the *Mirṣād*, on par with the works of the fifteenth century Sūfi poet and theologian 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d. 1492). These men, Yuan wrote, possessed extraordinary knowledge and sagely

³²GZYDYY, 16:338.

³³GZYDYY, 16:338.

merits. Their written works, Yuan suggests, explicate the foundations and operation of creation and the potentials of human beings. These works, he adds, provide a practical program for the practitioner (*xingdao zhe* 行道者). It was the language barrier, according to Yuan, that made these experiences unavailable to Confucian scholars, and hence he warmly welcomed explications of these works in Chinese.³⁴

Similarly, Ma Zhu 馬注 (ca. 1640–1711), an important Chinese–Muslim scholar from Yunnan and a precursor of a local movement that promoted the publication of Islamic scholarship in Chinese, quoted passages from Wu Zunqi’s Chinese translation of the *Mirṣād* to support his explanation on Islamic theology and practice in his work, *Qingzhen zhinan* 清真指南 (“Compass to Islam,” pub. 1683). Ma does not, however, acknowledge the source of his quotes. An example of such a case appears in his chapter titled “Unitary Compassion” (*duci* 獨慈), where he quotes a certain Shyakh Hari (*Shai-he Ha-li* 篩赫哈哩). This quote is borrowed with minor modification from Chapter 19, Part III in Wu Zunqi’s translation.³⁵ Interestingly, the modification here includes a change of the title of the quoted person from *daozhang* 道長 in Wu Zunqi’s translation to *Shai-he* 篩赫 in Ma Zhu’s work, possibly due to the resonance of the former with Chinese popular religion. The original Persian passage, which is missing from some versions of the *Mirṣād*, refers to this person as *Pir Hari*. The identity of this person is not fully clear, but it might refer to ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī (d. 1088), a famous Ṣūfī theologian from Herat.³⁶

Liu Zhi, one of the most prolific Chinese–Muslim scholars of the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, extensively used the *Mirṣād* in his expositions on the natural world. In particular, Liu Zhi lists the Persian *Mirṣād* as one of the main bibliographical sources for his work, *Tianfang xingli* 天方性理 “On Nature and Principles in Islam.” The first part of the work (titled *Benjing* 本經 “The Root Text”), which includes a general overview of Liu Zhi’s philosophy of nature, includes multiple references to the *Mirṣād*. None of these references seem to be borrowed from one of the existing Chinese translations. Liu Zhi mentions the *Mirṣād* as the source of his descriptions of the cosmogenesis process, the structure and operation of the human body, and the manifestations of the Divine in the physical world. These descriptions articulate Greco-Islamic theories, such as the Aristotelean Four Elements, Galenic Humors, and Islamic cosmologies in Chinese, borrowing terms and concepts from the Confucian and Buddhist discourses.³⁷ These references seem to be paraphrases and seem not to have been literally borrowed from the original Persian text. Moreover, Liu Zhi merged these references with statements of similar ideas that he found in other Persian texts, such as Jāmi’s *Lawā’ih* and *Ashī’at al-lama’at*, ‘Azīz al-dīn Nasafī’s (fl. 13th century) *Maqṣad al-aqṣā* and an unidentified work titled *Mawāqif*. These references, however, demonstrate the centrality of the *Mirṣād* to Liu Zhi’s work and his reading of the Persian text through the prism of the philosophy of nature.

Conclusion

The history of the accommodation of Najm al-Dīn Dāya’s Persian work, *Mirṣād al-‘ibād*, in China sheds light on a few transformations that Chinese Islamic scholarship went through between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. From the earliest encounters with this text, Chinese scholars began to straddle an adherence to tradition and an aspiration for change. The introduction of the *Mirṣād*, and its inclusion in the curricula of Chinese Islamic schools, mirrored a gradual aptitude to depart from the traditional, and, by the sixteenth century, rather outdated form of mosque education that was limited to rudimentary engagement with Arabic texts, to a more expansive Chinese Islamic scholarship. That new form of scholarship introduced the use of Persian and deepened the engagement with

³⁴These comments appear in Yuan Ruqi’s preface (dated 1704) to Liu Zhi’s *Tianfang xingli* 天方性理. See *TFXL* 17:14. ³⁵*GZYDYY*, 16:444. I would like to thank Jonathan Lipman for bringing this passage to my attention.

³⁶There is a possibility that Ma Zhu is using another text that quotes Shyakh Hari. However, the resemblance between this Chinese passage between Ma Zhu and Wu Zunqi’s works seems to suggest that Ma Zhu borrowed it from Wu Zunqi’s translation.

³⁷For more on Liu Zhi’s translation, see Weil (2022), pp. 47–66).

mystical and philosophical Islam. From that time onwards, at least up to the second half of the nineteenth century, Persian texts were given an important place within the Chinese Islamic archive.

The efforts to bring across the meanings of the *Mirṣād al-‘ibād* brought to light an additional contestation between two ideological camps: the philologists and the philosophers. The former advocated the study of Islamic texts in their original language, privileging philological scrutiny over philosophical expositions; the latter viewed meanings as the goal of scholarship and aspired to convey meaning in a way that could be grasped even by those who did not possess the linguistic competency to read texts in their original language. Straddling these two positions, Chinese–Muslim scholars produced reading practices and translation methods that led subsequent Chinese Islamic scholarship in two different, yet often complementary, directions.

Finally, the availability of the text of the *Mirṣād* in Chinese allowed Chinese readers to interpret the text according to their own interests and understandings. Some viewed it as a historical record of past experiences; some took it to be a philosophical treatise on the structure and operation of the natural world; whilst others viewed it as a manual for the Chinese–Muslim practitioner. Straddled between readings, the text of the *Mirṣād* presented early modern Chinese Muslims with a rich repository of themes and theories that represented the manifold facets of the Islamicate world.

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