

Praising the Prophet Muhammad in Chinese

A new translation and analysis of Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang's Ode to the Prophet

by Brendan Newlon

The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) is popularly thought of by Chinese Muslims as a golden age of Islam in China. During this period, Muslims grew as a community, not only because existing families thrived, but also because they attracted greater numbers of converts to the religion. These social changes gradually led to the emergence of a class of Chinese Muslim literati and a new literary genre of translated and original Islamic texts in the Chinese language.

The overall success and well being experienced by Muslims in China during the Ming was due in no small part to the Muslim-friendly actions and policies initiated by the dynasty's founder, the Hongwu Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368-1398). Throughout his life, Zhu surrounded himself with Muslims, both in his personal affairs and in connection with official matters of state:

His original war band, made up of men like Hu Dahai and Chang Yuchu, is described as heavily Muslim. Remarkably, so too is his very family; according to Chinese Muslim tradition Zhu Yuanzhang's first wife, Empress Ma (Ma Hou), was a Muslim; he also had an adoptive Muslim son, Mu Ying; brother; and father-in-law, Guo Zixing.¹

¹ Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, "The Marranto Emperor: The Mysterious Bond between Zhu Yuanzhang and the Chinese Muslims," in *Long Live the Emperor!: Uses of the Ming Founder across Six Centuries of East Asian History*, by Sarah Schneewind (Minneapolis: Society for Ming Studies, 2008), 276. In a footnote, Benite adds: "On Mu Ying see 'Mu Ying,' DMB, 1079-83, in which Frederick Mote specifically rejects the claim that Mu was a Muslim; On Empress Ma see 'Empress Ma,' DMB, 1023-26, in which Chou T'ao-chi does not refer to the Empress as Muslim."

In 1935, the historian Jin Jitang went as far as to hint that Zhu Yuanzhang was himself a Muslim, a claim Chinese historian Fu Tongxian made explicitly. Fu explains that “the attitude of the Ming emperors was partial towards Islam and they held it in the highest esteem. It is probably that Taizu Zhu Yuanzhang was a follower of the Islamic Teaching.”² For those who subscribe to the narrative of a Muslim Ming Emperor, the smoking gun is the emperor's remarkably favorable public engagement with the religion of Islam:

For instance, in the early years of Emperor Hongwu's reign in the Ming Dynasty ' His Majesty ordered to have mosques built in Xijing and Nanjing [the capital cities], and in southern Yunnan, Fujian and Guangdong. His Majesty also personally wrote *baizizan* [a eulogy] in praise of the Prophet's virtues.¹³

The text of Zhu's poetic ode *baizizan*, presented below as the *One Hundred Words of Praise*, lauds the religion of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad with brazen approbation. Determining Zhu's personal religious affiliation may be impossible from the available historical data, but his poem has indisputably been written in the authorial tone of a believer.

The emperor's 14th century ode praising the Prophet Muhammad was among the earliest known texts to introduce Islam in Chinese. It is not only authored in Chinese language, but also in a classical Chinese poetic style. Furthermore, it makes use of familiar conceptual structures and phrases that convey multiple layers of meaning within the context of the Chinese religious philosophical discourse of the period. What follows is a complete presentation of the emperor's historic poem, including a new critical English translation.⁴

² Jin Jitang (金吉堂), *Zhongguo hui jiao shi yan jiu* (中國回教史研究) [*A historical study of Islam in China*] (北平: 成達師範出版部, 1935), 154; Fu Tongxian (傅統先), *Zhongguo hui jiao shi* (中國回教史) (中國: 商務印書館, 1934), 60, <http://goo.gl/Lkcv9a>; Both were cited in Ben-Dor Benite, “The Marrano Emperor: The Mysterious Bond between Zhu Yuanzhang and the Chinese Muslims,” 276–77.

³ Maria Jaschok and Jingjun Shui, *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own* (Psychology Press, 2000), 77.

⁴ A number of translations are available, but I have translated it here in a way that is attentive to the many referential expressions and set phrases that could only have been chosen deliberately by the author, and demonstrate advanced literacy in Islamic traditions. The nature of classical Chinese poetry allows for some ambiguity in meaning, and while I was not able to preserve all of the potential meanings in the English

One Hundred Words of Praise

百字讚

1	<i>The universe began with the heavenly tablet recording</i>	乾坤初始，天籍注名。
2	<i>his name. The religion-delivering great sage, born in</i>	傳教大聖，降生西域。
	<i>the western realm.</i>	
3	<i>Conferring and receiving heavenly scripture in thirty</i>	授受天經，三十部冊，
4	<i>parts, universally transforming all created beings.</i>	普化眾生。億兆君師，
	<i>Master of the trillion rulers, leader of the ten thousand</i>	萬聖領袖。
	<i>sages.</i>	
5	<i>Assisted by destiny, protector of the community. In each</i>	協助天運，保庇國民。
6	<i>of the five prayers, he silently supplicates for their total</i>	五時祈祐，默祝太平。
7	<i>well-being. His intention is that Allah should remember</i>	存心真主，加志窮民。
8	<i>the needy. Deliver them from tribulations to safety,</i>	拯救患難，洞徹幽冥。
	<i>Knower of the unseen.</i>	
9	<i>Exalted above every soul and spirit, free from any</i>	超拔靈魂，脫離罪業。
10	<i>blameworthy deeds. A mercy to all of the worlds, whose</i>	仁覆天下，道冠古今。
	<i>path is preeminent for all time.</i>	
11	<i>Renounce spiritual ignorance; return to The One – that</i>	降邪歸一，教名清真。
	<i>is the religion called Islam.</i>	
12	<i>Muhammad is the most noble sage.</i>	穆罕默德，至貴聖人。

The language of this poem is fascinating, in part because it is clearly evocative of set phrases from Islamic tradition, especially concepts popular among the Central Asian Sufi orders. Many of those concepts have since spread to the point of becoming ubiquitous among Muslims worldwide. The emperor's reference to those ideas demonstrates his remarkable familiarity with Islam and the high esteem with which he regarded Islam relative to other religions.

translation, I will discuss some of them below. **Mandarin pronunciation guide:** gān kūn chū shǐ / tiān jí zhù míng / chuán jiào dà shèng / jiàng shèng xī yù / shòu shòu tiān jīng / sān shí bù cè / pǔ huà zhòng shèng / yì zhào jūn shī / wàn shèng líng xiù / xié zhù tiān yùn / bǎo bì guó mǐn / wú shí qí yòu / mò zhù tài píng / cún xīn zhēn zhǔ / jiā zhì qióng mǐn / zhěng jiù huàn nàn / dòng bié yōu míng / chāo bá líng hún / tuō lí zuì yè / rén fù tiān xià / dào guàn gǔ jīn / jiàng xié guī yī / jiào míng qīng zhēn / mù hǎn mò dé / zhì guì shèng rén

For example, in his first line he refers to the view common among Muslims (particularly within Sufi traditions) about the first thing that Allah created. Prophetic traditions, each having been established to varying degrees of narrative authenticity, seem to differ about what Allah created first. According to one narration, the first thing created was the heavenly Pen (sometimes identified allegorically as the initial principle of intellect or reason) which records on the heavenly Tablet everything that Allah destined to exist or occur from that time on until the Day of Judgment.⁵ According to other narrations, the first thing Allah created was the light of the Prophet Muhammad (*nūr Muḥammadiyya*) meaning, perhaps, his soul, or the blessed essence of truth and goodness that the Prophet would later embody in the world. This second narration is the account preferred by most Sufis. The emperor's eloquent construction of eight Chinese characters manages to reconcile both views by explaining that the Pen and Tablet came into existence in their action of declaring the name of the Prophet. Thus, the Prophet existed at least in a *nominal* sense, but recording this fact was the first *action* with which the universe was inaugurated.

The phrase “thirty parts” (line 3) refers to the custom of dividing the text of the Qur'an, Allah’s eternal speech revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, into thirty sections (*juz*) for convenience when planning to recite the entire book within a month. “Leader to the ten thousand sages” (line 4) refers to the Prophet Muhammad's honorific titles *sayyid al-anbiyā'* and *imām al-mursalīn*, “chief of the prophets” and “leader of the Messengers.” The unusual placement of the word “intention” (line 7) would not make sense in the context of the line unless the author was familiar with the technical vocabulary of Islamic ethics, which locates intention as the real

⁵ The word I've translated above as “heavenly tablet” (line 1) is more properly a *register*, which combines the function of Pen and Tablet within one word. Using this word enables the author to further emphasize function over form, which supports the interpretation of the Prophet as the first created *thing* and the recording of his name as the first created *action*.

source of an action's moral value, as expressed in the famous *ḥadīth* “actions are but by intention...”⁶ The phrase “free from any blameworthy deeds” (line 9), introduces the concept of *‘iṣmah*, which is the Sunni orthodox position within Islamic theology that the prophets were all divinely protected from ever committing sinful or blameworthy actions. Of course, praising the Prophet as a “mercy to all the worlds” (line 10) is a close translation of a verse in the Qur'an (*al-Anbiyā'* 21:107).⁷

The phrase “exalted above every soul and spirit” (line 9) may be a translation of a line from al-Būsīrī's (d. 1294) famous ode the *Burdah*, which praises the Prophet in a style similar to the emperor's ode. In the *Burdah*, al-Būsīrī writes that “Muhammad is the noble leader over both worlds and both creations” (i.e. humans and jinn; souls and spirits). The practice of reciting the *Burdah* and its popularity among Muslims everywhere, and especially among the Sufī orders that spread throughout Central Asia, makes it likely that the *Burdah* would have been a familiar poem among Chinese Sufis and mosque communities at the time. A Muslim audience might very well have understood this line in the emperor's poem to be a translated quotation of al-Būsīrī's ode.⁸

⁶ Yahya ibn Sharaf an-Nawawī, *Forty Hadith*, trans. ‘Izz al-Dīn Ibrāhīm and Denys Johnson-Davies (Damascus, Syria: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1976), 26.

⁷ The expression I've translated as “Knower of the unseen” (line 8) is difficult to interpret definitively because the author's intended meaning is unclear. Muslims generally affirm that, to some degree, the Prophet was endowed by Allah with knowledge of certain unseen realities. However, the phrase appears here at the end of a series of supplications asking Allah to help those who are absent from the supplicant (*fī al-ghayb* “in the unseen”) and whose needs may also not be apparent to others (i.e., they are “unseen”). It is characteristic of Islamic supplications to finish by calling on Allah through one of the divine names or characteristics that relate to the theme of the supplication, and the Qur'an refers to Allah as the “Knower of the unseen and the apparent” (*al-Hashr* 59:22). For that reason, I have capitalized the letter “K” to indicate that this is most likely intended as a direct address to Allah through one of the divine characteristics mentioned in the Qur'an, and not a statement addressing the Prophet's knowledge of the unseen. An intriguing second possibility is that the author intentionally leveraged the ambiguity inherent in the Chinese poetic language to express both of these potential meanings simultaneously.

⁸ Since texts such as the *Burdah* are most often transmitted orally, it is impossible to determine when it first became popular among Muslims in China, however, we do know that a complete Chinese translation of the *Burdah* was recorded by Yusuf Ma Dexin (d. 1874) under the title *tianfang shijing* (*The Classic of Arabian Poetry*).

The emperor's ode also incorporates set phrases and expressions commonly used in Chinese Buddhist and Confucian literary traditions. For example, “universally transforming all created beings” (line 3) is a set phrase used in Buddhist sutras. It appears often in Buddhist texts and discourse, including the Chinese translation of the Avatamsaka sutra (ca. 699 CE), which uses the same wording in the line: “The Buddha’s disciple dwelling here acts as a wheel-turning king, universally teaching living beings to practice the ten goods.”⁹ Transferring this particular phrase from the context of Buddhism to the context of Islam in China is significant, because after Buddhism, Islam was the first foreign religious tradition to become prevalent in China and represent itself as a universal teaching. The choice to use this phrase is a declaration of Islam's naturalization; despite its foreign origins, Islam's universal scope makes it a Chinese religion through the same universalizing expression that legitimized the status of Buddhism in China. The choice to translate the word “prophet” referentially through the Confucian word for a “sage,” further naturalizes his *teaching* (line 11) as a principled model of social propriety and ethical ideal within the same tradition as the teachings of Confucius and Mencius.¹⁰ In Chinese, the word *jiao*, or teaching, is the same general word which is used to designate a religion; at the time, Islam was most often referred to by the name *qingzhen jiao*, or “pure true teaching”.

The line “renounce spiritual ignorance; return to The One” (line 11) appears to be a complicated play on words. On the one hand, it presents the narrative of Islam as having been revealed in the context of *jahiliyya*, spiritual ignorance characterized by erroneous religious beliefs. In this sense, it could be a statement of Islamic monotheism dispelling the *heresies* of the

⁹ In Chinese: “佛子住此作輪王 普化眾生行十善.” Buddhist Text Translation Society, *Introducing the Avatamsaka Sutra*. (Talmage, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 1980), 39, <http://goo.gl/SLfn8s>.

¹⁰ For further discussion of the function of Confucian terminology and discourse in establishing normative Chinese social values, see Brendan Peter Newlon, “The Rectification of Identities: Constructing Orthodoxy in Chinese Society, Confucianism, and Islam,” *Essays on Islam in China*, May 2015, https://www.academia.edu/27081161/The_Rectification_of_Identities_Constructing_Orthodoxy_in_Chinese_Society_Confucianism_and_Islam.

polytheists, as in the Islamic profession of faith “there is no god but the One God.” At the same time, it evokes the narrative of Islam as abrogating or correcting the corrupted understanding of all prior revelations (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Sabean gnosticism) and calling for a return to their common origin: the divine revelation of God's oneness. In the competitive plurality of religious traditions in Central Asia and the cosmopolitan trade centers of the Silk Road, this narrative was extended by analogy to the abrogation and correction of all other Christian, Zoroastrian, Manichean, and gnostic teachings. Upon reaching China, it could reasonably be assumed to extend in the same way to Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism as well. In fact, this is actually implied by the preceding line “...path preeminent for all time,” (line 10) which one might just as easily translate in a more confrontational tone as “this Tao supersedes all prior and contemporary teachings.”

The choice of the phrase *xiangxie guiyi*, “renounce spiritual ignorance; return to The One” (line 11) is also reminiscent of phrases like *sanjiao guiyi*, “the unification of the three teachings.” The latter is an example of a typical phrase in the Neo-Confucian discourse of religious syncretism which became increasingly popular during the same period in which the emperor wrote his ode to the Prophet. In that discourse, “unification of the three teachings” meant incorporating Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist concepts to constitute a unified philosophical and religious system. A clever linguistic twist that appears in the emperor's poem is that the shared words *guiyi* cannot be taken to mean “unification,” unless they simultaneously express the sense of “returning” since the line would not otherwise make sense as a complete thought. Instead, it evokes the narrative of Islam calling people to abandon the erroneous religions corrupted by generations of their predecessors and return to *fiṭrah*, the original “clear and true” faith at the root of human nature.

The ode can be partitioned into three parts. The first part (lines 1-4) introduces the topic in a universal context, identifying the Prophet as the central focus in the creation of the universe. Moreover, his message provides the means of universal salvation for all beings, which naturally justifies praising his rank as superseding that of all rulers and sages. The second part (lines 5-8) offers a candid glimpse into the heart and private thoughts of the Prophet; as he supplicates in prayer, his sincerity, humility, and selfless concern for others are revealed to the reader. In the final third of the poem (lines 9-12), the rhetorical tone of the poem shifts again. Unlike the mythic sense of grand cosmic significance of the first part or the intimate compassion reflected in the second part, the third part seems to confront the reader directly with an appeal to embrace the path of Islam. The entire poem could be read as a persuasive argument: *the entire universe is centered upon this supreme sage, he conveys a complete scripture from heaven, and he epitomizes the sage ruler whose sole concern is his people's well-being – surely his is the only path worthy to be followed!*

In keeping with the frank tone of the poem's conclusion, lines 10-11 might be interpreted as stating, “this *religion supersedes all prior and contemporary teachings, so abandon those heresies and return to unity in the religion named Pure and True (i.e. Islam).*”¹¹ The reader is urged to abandon the erroneous teachings of inferior sages. Islam, as its Chinese name highlights, is the *path* that is *clear and true* (line 11), *preeminent for all time* (line 10) and capable of *universally transforming all beings* (line 3) by showing *mercy to all under heaven* (line 10). In other words, the Tao of this Prophet provides the ideal foundation for a harmonious society, so following it is nothing less than an ethical imperative.

¹¹ I have italicized the words in the sentence above that are the explicit meaning of the Chinese characters to identify the way the dynamics of the Chinese grammar and poetic structure invite various interpretations of these phrases.

It is also possible that the poem's final lines were written to approximate, in elegant Chinese verse, the Islamic testification of faith (*shahadah*), sincere utterance of which constitutes a formal conversion to the religion of Islam. The *shahadah* is a declaration of faith that is usually pronounced in Arabic and consisting of two parts. The first part couples a rejection and negation of false deities with an affirmation of the one supreme God. The Arabic phrase, *lā 'ilāha 'illā-llāh*, might literally be rendered “no [false] gods – only the one God.” If we read the emperor's phrase *jiangxie guiyi* (line 11) as a parallel of this construction, it constitutes a declaration “[I] reject false belief – returning to The One.”

The words *zhigui shengren*, translated above as “most noble sage” (line 12), might intentionally convey two meanings at once. Although I interpreted *zhigui* adjectivally to describe the prophet as *the most noble*, this may not fully capture the intended meaning. The numerous references in his poem attest to the emperor's sophisticated knowledge of Islamic religious concepts and phrases, so we can be certain that he understood the centrality of the *shahada* within Islamic discourse. In the genre of Islamic songs and poems to which the emperor's ode belongs, the *shahada* is also frequently repeated as a chant, chorus, or refrain. With this in mind, we must consider an alternative reading.

The meter of the poem limits each line to two sets of four syllables each, which leaves little room to spare for possessive articles, nonetheless, *zhigui* could represent a separate noun. In that case, *zhigui shengren* would become a statement of relationship based upon a possessive noun: “Muhammad is the sage of the Ultimate-Cherished.” This mirrors the second half of the *shahada*: *muḥammadur-rasūlu-llāh*, or “Muhammad is the messenger of God.” In fact, it would be difficult to express the same meaning more eloquently within the poem's strictly metered format. Considering the ease with which the line could be read in this way and the strong

expectation that any work in this genre would prominently include the shahada, it is probable that the parallelism between these lines of poetry in Chinese and the Islamic testification of faith in Arabic was intentional.

Whether or not Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang intended to declare himself to be Muslim by glossing the Islamic testification of faith in the final lines of his poem praising the Prophet remains a matter of minor literary and historical debate, but the central message of his poem is clear: “Muhammad is the most noble sage.”

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