



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE GONGFU THEORY IN LIU ZHI'S TIANFANG XINGLI: WITH A DISCUSSION ON HIS ABSORPTION AND TRANSFORMATION OF CONFUCIAN THOUGHT

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission Aug., 24, 2025 Acceptance Aug., 28, 2025 Keywords Gongfu Theory; Three Ways; Supra-Way; Confucian Thought Corresponding Author 2466228378@qq.com	This study explores the conception of gongfu theory in Liu Zhi's Tianfang Xingli, with particular attention to its absorption and integration of Confucian thought. An analysis of Liu Zhi's gongfu theory reveals that it is deeply influenced by the traditional Confucian discourse on self-cultivation, while also incorporating distinctive elements from Islamic philosophy. The paper first outlines Liu Zhi's understanding of the process by which human beings come to know the "True One" (God), and then examines the reasons for the estrangement between humanity and the "True One" (God). On this basis, it elaborates on Liu Zhi's proposed methods of returning to the "True One" (God), namely the cultivation paths of the Three Ways and the Supra-Way. Finally, the paper focuses on Liu Zhi's integration of Confucian thought within his gongfu theory, highlighting the unique synthesis of Confucianism and Islam in his philosophy, and offering new insights into the dialogue and interaction between Chinese traditional philosophy and foreign religious thought.

1. INTRODUCTION

Liu Zhi (c. 1660–c. 1730), a native of Nanjing in Jiangsu Province, was an eminent Muslim scholar and a prominent synthesizer of Islamic thought in China. Throughout his life, he dedicated himself to the endeavor of "explaining the scriptures through Confucianism," that is, interpreting Islamic classics in the Chinese language through the lens of Confucian philosophy. Liu Zhi sought to integrate Islamic thought with the philosophical traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, thereby constructing an Islamic intellectual system with distinct Chinese characteristics. His work greatly advanced the localization and sinicization of Islam in China.

Within Islamic thought, the theory and practice of spiritual cultivation constitute an

indispensable component. In his *Tianfang Xingli* (Nature and Principle in Islam), Liu Zhi successfully employed Confucian doctrines to interpret the Islamic discourse on self-cultivation, culminating in the creation of a complete system of gongfu theory within the Chinese Islamic intellectual tradition.

2. HOW HUMAN BEINGS PERCEIVE THE “TRUE ONE” (GOD)

A section dedicated to the significant literature resources, consulted or employed, that contributed to the study.

The epistemology of Islam fundamentally revolves around the cognition and belief in Allah. Epistemology constitutes a significant component of Liu Zhi's philosophical thought, with its core purpose and service centered on "recognizing the Lord." (Liang Xiangming, 2003) Therefore, Liu Zhi's gongfu theory essentially addresses how to better understand, believe in, and ultimately return to the “True One” (God).

Liu Zhi posits that human beings are primarily composed of three aspects: the physical body, the mental body, and the spiritual body. To apprehend the “True One” (God), one must commence from these three dimensions. Liu Zhi states:

"Human beings, in their existence, possess three bodies: the physical body, the mental body, and the spiritual body. To perceive the “True One” (God) through these bodies, there are also three ways, namely, through these three bodies. To perceive the “True One” (God) through the physical body, the effort lies in adherence. Adherents know what they ought to do but cannot understand why they should do it. This level knows the name but not the essence. To perceive the “True One” (God) through the mental body, the effort lies in dispelling misunderstandings. Those who dispel misunderstandings see the reasons but cannot grasp the root causes. This level sees the parts but not the whole. To perceive the “True One” (God) through the spiritual body, the effort lies in seamless unity. Seamless unity means grasping the root causes and being one with them, reaching the ultimate. These three levels are the general principles of spiritual cultivation for all ages (Liu, 1994, p.299)."

Since humans are composed of three parts, they can apprehend the “True One” (God) through these aspects. Using the physical body to perceive the “True One” (God) entails adhering to religious laws and doctrines. However, mechanical adherence only informs us of what we should do, not why we should do it. Those at this level merely know the name of the “True One” (God) but do not understand its true essence. Using the mental body to perceive the “True One” (God) involves the effort to dispel errors. Dispelling errors means seeing the reasons behind things but not fully grasping their roots. Those at this level can see the distinctions but not the unity. Using the spiritual body to perceive the “True One” (God) involves achieving a state of seamless unity. Seamless unity means grasping the root causes and being one with them, which is the highest state. These three aspects can be considered the general theory of gongfu.

In Liu Zhi's view, to return to the true essence, one must start with the self. In other words, human beings are the subjects of cognition. The process of cognitive effort moves from the external to the internal, from the physical body to the mental body and then to the spiritual body, transforming from external knowledge to internal insight. Only through internal insight can one truly return to the “True One” (God). Regarding the path to recognizing the Lord, like most

Muslim scholars, Liu Zhi advocates achieving this through self-knowledge (Jin, 2010). As Ma Zhu states: "The way to recognize the Lord begins with recognizing oneself. If self-recognition is not thorough, one will be lost." (Ma Zhu, 1988, p.377) They often cite the hadith: "Whoever knows himself knows his Creator" as evidence.

However, each person's state is different, so the effort required to recognize and return to the "True One" (God) varies. Perhaps through the efforts and cultivation of one person, these three levels can be achieved; or perhaps these three levels represent states achieved by different individuals. Among these three levels, the understanding of the "True One" (God) through the physical body is shallow, through the mental body is deeper, and through the spiritual body is profound to the point of being almost immeasurable. Nevertheless, perceiving the "True One" (God) through the spiritual body still involves doing so with self-awareness. Perceiving with self-awareness means the self will experience birth and death, coming and going. As long as there is coming and going, traces still remain. If one can be completely one with the "self," there will be no coming and going. However, even if one is completely one with the "self," if one still clearly knows this state of unity with the "True One" (God), it means the traces have not completely dissolved, as there are still the concepts of "self" and "True One" (God). If one can reach a state of complete unawareness, these traces disappear. But even if I do not know that the "True One" (God) is manifesting in me, I cannot guarantee that the "True One" (God) itself will not be aware of manifesting me. Once the "True One" (God) has this awareness, it is like I have cognition, and the traces have not completely dissolved. Only when I do not know that the "True One" (God) is recognizing me, and the "True One" (God) does not know that there is a "me" to be recognized, can it be said that the true state of dissolution has been achieved.

Liu Zhi's discourse on the levels of insight presents the general theory of gongfu. It divides insight into three levels: "knowledge," "perception," and "spirituality" (body, mind, and spirit), emphasizing a progressive deepening of insight, with the deepest level being through the spiritual body. However, even the state of perceiving the "True One" (God) through the spiritual body, if done with self-awareness, will leave traces due to birth and death changes. Even "being one with the self" has different stages; if one is aware of the unity, traces remain. Only when both "I" and the "True One" (God) are unaware, transcending the boundaries of self and external objects, achieving absolute harmony and unity, does Liu Zhi aim to guide people beyond the self and subjective cognition, pursuing a pure and transcendent spiritual state.

3. THE CAUSES OF THE SEPARATION BETWEEN HUMAN BEINGS AND THE "TRUE ONE" (GOD)

Once one understands how to perceive the "True One" (God), action must follow. Yet before engaging in gongfu practice, one must first recognize a crucial point: to resolve a problem, one must understand why it arises—just as Zhu Xi asserted that in scholarly inquiry, one should not only "know what is so" but also "know why it is so." The same applies to the cultivation of spiritual practice. Why, then, is there a separation between humanity and the "True One" (God), preventing their unity? Liu Zhi contends that such separation originates from the inherent limitations of human beings themselves.

"Heaven is heaven because of man; man is man because of heaven. Without cause, barriers

arise, and I become separated from the True Sovereign, unable to communicate. Thus, though man dwells within heaven daily, he does not realize how near heaven is; though heaven abides within man daily, there is no way to unite them. Everywhere is inherently as it should be, yet everywhere there are obstructions. And these obstructions are not truly everywhere—everywhere they are self-imposed. Therefore, the True Sovereign is never without communion with me, yet I am never in communion with the True Sovereign (Liu, 1994, p.259)."

Liu Zhi argues that humanity and the "True One" (God) are, in essence, unified. Yet, without apparent reason, obstructions arise that cut humanity off from the Sovereign of all beings, impeding mutual communication. As a result, although humans live within the realm of the "True One" (God) every day, they fail to recognize its nearness; and although the "True One" (God) is present in people's everyday existence, it cannot achieve union with them. In truth, all is originally in its natural state, yet everywhere obstruction occurs—not because such obstacles inherently exist, but because people themselves create them. The "True One" (God) is perpetually in communion with us, yet by our own self-imposed barriers we obscure ourselves from it.

This separation, therefore, is not an objective reality but a self-created obstacle born of our own limitations. How, then, do such limitations arise? In his discourse on human nature, Liu Zhi categorizes human beings into four types—sage (sheng), worthy (xian), wise (zhi), and foolish (yu)—a classification "half determined by heaven and half determined by free will." From the perspective of innate li and qi, these distinctions are predetermined, yet from the perspective of later cultivation, they result from personal choice (Liu, 1994). It is precisely this combination of innate and acquired factors that produces human differences in reality, thereby giving rise to diverse limitations.

"Not only the foolish suffer obstruction; the wise are not exempt. Not only the wise suffer obstruction; the worthy are not exempt either. The obstacles of the worthy differ from those of the wise; the obstacles of the wise differ from those of the foolish. Although these obstacles vary, all equally remain separated from the True Sovereign. The foolish are obstructed in body; the wise, in mind; the worthy, in nature. Bodily obstruction arises from bodily desires—seeking sound, color, fragrance, and taste. Yet how can they realize that these sensory objects are themselves inherently as they should be? Mental obstruction arises from reliance on knowledge—on hearing, sight, learning, and skills. Yet how can they realize that such faculties are also inherently as they should be? Obstruction in nature arises when nature has not been fully transformed. Nature is the inherent quality of the Sovereign, yet retains the distinction of 'self.' If nature does not wholly merge into the "True One" (God), the self still remains. Spiritual marvels may exist, but they are attributed to the self rather than the Sovereign; illumination may exist, but it is ascribed to the self rather than the Sovereign. Thus, spiritual marvels and illumination become obstructions. Even at such attainment, one may take these as obstructions arising from the inherent. This is the meaning of 'everywhere is inherently so, yet everywhere becomes an obstruction.' The sage, however, turns every obstruction back into the original nature (Liu, 1994, pp.257-258)."

Liu Zhi thus holds that fools, the wise, and the worthy all face their own obstacles. While the nature of their obstructions differs, none can achieve unhindered communion with the "True One" (God). Bodily obstacles stem from sensory desire, which prevents transcendence; mental obstacles arise from attachment to cognitive faculties, which obscures pure insight; natural

obstacles stem from the residual “self” in one’s nature prior to complete transformation. The sage alone can dwell amidst obstructions while remaining in harmony with the inherent nature.

Liu Zhi integrates his theory of human nature with his gongfu theory, arguing that differences in the manifestation and endowment of human nature determine the varying degrees and forms of separation from the “True One” (God). While such innate variance appears to be an objective and given cause of separation, in reality, these barriers exist only within the self, not in the external world. Through cultivation, they can ultimately be dissolved. Upon attaining sagehood, one reaches a state wherein there are no barriers—or rather, where every barrier is, at the same time, no barrier—thus transcending the confines of the “myself.”

Beyond such self-imposed limitations, Liu Zhi identifies another cause of separation: the quality of one’s faith in the “True One” (God).

To Liu Zhi, one who is truly united with the “True One” (God) harbors neither doubt nor certainty, for such a person abides wholly in the inherent state. Only the sage reaches this condition. Those below the sage have not achieved union, and thus inevitably experience both doubt and belief—conditions that themselves contribute to separation. For Liu Zhi, doubt (yi) is deviation from what is correct, inclining one toward error; belief (xin) is steadfastness in the Way, enabling one to avoid complexity and falsehood (Liu, 1994).

“The foolish neither know how to doubt nor how to believe; their doubt and belief are not worth discussing. Those who harbor much doubt and much belief, directing their minds to the brink of danger, are generally among the worthy and the wise. Their doubts and beliefs remain within the bounds of body, mind, and nature. Belief is a virtue: if what is believed is correct, whether one believes through body, mind, or nature, it is good. Doubt, however, is perilous. To take doubt as doubt is a lesser harm; to take doubt as belief is far more dangerous. The worthy and the wise are most inclined to this mistake. If one’s doubt remains recognized as doubt, one may still return to belief; but if doubt is mistaken for belief, it deepens with time and may never be overcome (Liu, 1994, pp.263-264).”

Liu Zhi further distinguishes the depth of doubt across three levels. Doubt confined to the body is shallow; doubt that enters the mind is deeper; doubt arising from one’s nature is the most dangerous—for it is nearly beyond remedy.

Bodily doubt occurs in daily life when one departs from the natural order of the body and embraces novel, ungrounded notions. While it burdens virtue, such doubt can still be corrected.

Mental doubt occurs in the pursuit of truth when one deviates from the natural order of the mind and delights in divergent paths, like a traveler heading north while intending to go south. This is a deeper burden, yet still reversible through sudden realization.

Natural doubt arises when both body and mind have reached advanced stages, and the principles of one’s true nature emerge. At this critical point—when spiritual powers and illumination are perfected—one may ask: “Is this my ability or the Sovereign’s? If mine, is it opposed to the Sovereign? Or am I in fact the Sovereign?” To doubt here is to stand at the precipice with no path back; it is the gravest peril. The closer one draws to the Sovereign, the more irreversible the doubt becomes. Such is the tragedy of the worthy and the wise who misuse their

intelligence.

In summary, Liu Zhi traces the causes of separation from the “True One” (God) to three progressively inward dimensions—body, mind, and nature. Each corresponds to distinct obstacles and doubts: bodily obstacles arise from sensory entanglement; mental obstacles, from restlessness of thought; natural obstacles, from attachment and self-centeredness. These barriers intertwine, creating a chasm between humanity and the “True One” (God). To return to the “True One” (God), one must transcend self-attachment and dissolve the very notion of “myself.”

4. THE METHODS OF GONGFU PRACTICE FOR RETURNING TO THE “TRUE ONE” (GOD)

The separation between human beings and the “True One” (God), as previously discussed, stems from the limitations of the self and from the disposition of one’s faith. These limitations manifest across the three dimensions of body, mind, and nature. Thus, returning to the “True One” (God) requires cultivating gongfu in these very aspects of the human self.

Regarding how to engage in such cultivation, Liu Zhi insists that one must follow the path indicated by the sages, for only the sage can truly fulfill the demands of the “True One” (God) and thus attain union with it:

“Heaven and earth, above and below, human beings and all things, within and without—all are the free-flowing manifestation of the inherent nature. Only the sage can put this into practice and thereby approach its realm. The sage takes ‘continuing nature’ as his own nature; and continuing nature is wholly identical with the inherent nature of the True Sovereign. Only through such complete identity can the sage put it into practice (Liu, 1994, p.244).”

For Liu Zhi, the entire cosmos is an outflow of the inherent nature of the “True One” (God), yet it is only the sage who can perfectly practice this and thereby unite with the “True One” (God). The reason is that the sage regards “continuing nature” (jixing) as his own—continuing the inherent nature of the Sovereign—which makes his own nature identical with the Sovereign’s. This enables the sage to enact gongfu in complete harmony with the “True One” (God).

One might ask: if the sage’s nature is already identical to the inherent nature of the “True One” (God), why is gongfu practice still needed? Anticipating such doubt, Liu Zhi distinguishes between “practice” (shijian) and “complete identity” (huntong):

“‘Practice’ means to be in full accord with the perfect circulation of the Sovereign’s inherent nature, present everywhere and lacking nothing. Only when nothing is absent can one fully manifest the substance and function of complete identity. Full manifestation of substance and function can then truly be called complete identity. Innate identity is identity with the stillness of the inherent; acquired identity is identity through concrete practice. Practice and stillness are not two separate states; wherever practice is, there is stillness (Liu, 1994, p.244).”

Thus, “practice” is not mere action but an unimpeded correspondence with the Sovereign’s ceaseless creative flow. This practice itself discloses the functional reality of complete identity. In the sage’s case, his practice is nothing other than the Sovereign’s activity; conversely, the Sovereign’s natural activity is precisely the sage’s practice. That is why “practice” and “identity” are, for the sage, one and the same.

Yet, Liu Zhi acknowledges that “the refinement of the sage is not what we dare to hope for (Liu, 1994, p.276).” In Islamic terms, the Prophet Muhammad is the final sage; all others are ordinary human beings (Sha Zongping, 2004). As the sage’s perfection is an ideal construct, ordinary people must follow a different path, one which the sage himself has set out—the method of the “Three Ways” (san cheng).

“Knowing that the multitude cannot [fully return], yet deeply desiring them to do so, the sage, amid such inability, points out the road of practice: first, li (rites); second, dao (the Way); third, zhen (truth). Li is the code of conduct in daily affairs, enacted at the bodily level. Dao is the orientation of rejecting the external and returning to the real, enacted at the mental level. Zhen is the full accord with the inherent, the consummation of li and dao, enacted at the level of nature. Practice at the level of nature is practice of the inherent itself. These three are not artificially imposed upon human beings, but rather are drawn from what the inherent nature has already implanted in them. Thus the sage discerns their order and instructs accordingly (Liu, 1994, p.244).”

“Li-way” (licheng) addresses the body by prescribing the five fundamental acts of Islamic devotion—shahada (declaration of faith), salat (ritual prayer), zakat (almsgiving), sawm (fasting), and hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca)—through which the body can be “rectified” (zheng shen) and bodily obstacles overcome.

“If the body is upright, it is a mirror reflecting the true aspect of the inherent. How is the body made upright? Through the five acts of the sacred teaching: declaration, to know one’s destination; ritual, to tread the old path; almsgiving, to relinquish attachment; fasting, to cut off material desire; pilgrimage, to return to the Real. Each act contains an inner meaning indicated through its outward form. Among these, the rituals are most profound, for in the movements of standing, bowing, kneeling, and sitting, one can quietly witness the inherent nature of self and things. Following the indications within each act, the gongfu becomes intricate and refined, and the body can thus be rectified (Liu, 1994, p.275).”

The “Dao-way” (daocheng) concerns the mind:

“If the mind is clear, it is the light that reflects the principles of the world. How is the mind made clear? By remaining unmoved amid external disturbances, and above all by ensuring that the inner virtue is not obscured. The mind has seven layers, containing the seven virtues, and five faculties, each with its own subtle operation: the wondrous eye that sees color without form; the wondrous ear that hears soundless speech; the wondrous nose that scents the aroma of the subtle realm; the wondrous mouth that tastes the sweetness of the Lord; the wondrous intellect that comprehends both the refined and the coarse. Perfecting the use of these five faculties while maintaining the seven virtues leaves the mind without deficiency—thus it can be clear (Liu, 1994, pp.275-276).”

The “Zhen-way” (zhencheng) perfects the nature (xing):

“If nature is fulfilled, it is the principle of the unity of Heaven and humanity. How is nature fulfilled? By the mind’s capacity to know, and still more by the body’s capacity to enact. When the mind reflects, no principle is left unknown; when the body responds, form returns to the formless. Knowing the whole and also its great function, my nature is thus illumined, and the myriad natures are not beyond it. Enacting what ought to be enacted, and also enacting the reason why

it ought to be, nature is fully expressed and without barrier to the numinous. Form and color are nature itself. The uninformed see form and color as mere form and color; the informed view them all as the expression of heavenly nature. When form and color are enacted, nature is thus fulfilled (Liu, 1994, pp.275-276).”

For ordinary people, the path of cultivation proceeds outward-inward: from rectifying the body (zheng shen) to clearing the mind (qing xin) to fulfilling the nature (jin xing). Yet even this path is insufficient for complete return to the “True One” (God), for “truth cannot easily be spoken of as ‘return.’ To seek return before any cultivation is to have no road; to seek return when cultivation has not yet transformed the self is to have a self. Without a road, one cannot speak of return; with a self, one also cannot speak of return (Liu, 1994, p.281).”

Thus, having the “Three Vehicles” without transcending them leaves one short of complete union. Above them stands the “Supra-way” (chaocheng):

“Above the Three Vehicles there is yet one method, the Supra-Vehicle—thereby Heaven and humanity are transformed, and names and traces are effaced (Liu, 1994, p.33).”

This stage begins by still employing the Three Vehicles to “polish away the acquired disposition.” But when cultivation reaches the point of imminent return, cultivation itself must be abandoned—otherwise, it becomes a new attachment. Worse yet, one might become attached to the very idea of abandoning cultivation, which is another obstacle.

For Liu Zhi, the most crucial act in transcending is “forgetting” (wang):

“In that which one urgently desires to return to, forget it—forget the cultivation, and also forget the return. Forgetting is the pivot of return. The very mind that seeks is itself the obstacle; the more one seeks to return, the less one returns (Liu, 1994, pp.281-282).”

True forgetting occurs in seeing, hearing, speaking, and acting—without the intention to match them to some notion of the inherent. The deliberate pursuit of accord in seeing and hearing is itself an obstruction. The same applies to speaking and acting. The more urgently one strives to return, the less likely it becomes.

“Forget the very principle of seeing, and also forget that I have seeing; forget the very principle of hearing, and also forget that I have hearing; forget the very principle of speaking and acting, and also forget that I have speaking and acting.... Thus, to have no cultivation is true cultivation; to have no advancement is true advancement; to have nothing gained is true gain; and to have no return is the true return—this is the meaning of complete return to the True (Liu, 1994, p.282).”

Liu Zhi thus bases his gongfu theory upon Islamic devotional practices, moving from outer discipline to inner realization in a graded path. Yet, for ultimate return to the “True One” (God), these graded methods are but expedients set forth by the sage; the ultimate gongfu path is no path at all—everywhere is equally the path. One must strip away all deliberate action and thought, thereby “returning the inherent to the inherent (Liu, 1994, p.239)” —a recognition that the highest attainment in cultivation “has both sudden and gradual aspects.”

5. LIU ZHI'S ABSORPTION AND TRANSFORMATION OF CONFUCIAN THOUGHT

The Confucian study of mind and nature begins with Confucius' doctrine of ren (benevolence) and reaches its formal establishment with Mencius' construction of the system of "fully realizing the mind to know nature, and thus knowing Heaven." Mencius states:

"He who fully realizes his mind knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows Heaven. Preserving his mind and nourishing his nature are the way to serve Heaven. Not distinguishing between a long or short life, but cultivating oneself and awaiting one's end, is the way to establish one's destiny (Yang, 2016, p.334)."

In Mencius' view, when one fully expands the innate goodness of the mind, one comes to understand human nature; since human nature originates from Heaven, tracing it back to its source leads to knowledge of Heaven. This "knowing," however, is not empirical knowledge. As Cai (2009) explains, for Mencius "fully realizing the mind" is an act of moral practice; thus, knowing nature and knowing Heaven are not modes of cognitive knowledge but knowledge realized through practice. Mere silent contemplation is futile—only moral cultivation leads to true knowledge.

In this interlinked framework of mind, nature, and Heaven, the sequence of "preserving," "nourishing," and "serving" is further clarified by Zhu Xi: "Preserving means holding fast without letting go; nourishing means following without harming; serving means revering and not disobeying" (Zhu, 1983).

This means that one steadfastly upholds the goodness of the mind without abandoning it, follows the goodness of nature without harming it, and adheres to the way of Heaven without deviation. Life's length is beyond human control, and a gentleman will not be troubled by it. Only through self-cultivation and virtue—fully accepting and manifesting Heaven-endowed moral nature—"Whatever happens is destiny; accept it in accord with its justice (Yang, 2016, p.334)"—can one truly establish one's fate.

From this standpoint, Han (2002, p.250) concludes: "To seek the Way of the sages, one must begin with Mencius". In later Neo-Confucianism, whether in the Cheng-Zhu school's emphasis on "investigating things to extend knowledge" and "nurturing the mind in stillness," or the Lu-Wang school's ideals of "illuminating the original mind" and "realizing the innate knowledge of the good," all build on Mencius' doctrinal framework and develop their own gongfu methods. Although differing in their understanding of the relationship between mind and nature—leading to variations in the path toward "fully realizing the mind to know nature and thus knowing Heaven" "On the Similarities and Differences between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming in Understanding Mencius' Chapter on Fully Realizing the Mind,"—both ultimately aim at achieving "the unity of knowledge and action" and "the unity of Heaven and humanity."

From the standpoint of Liu Zhi's gongfu theory, it is evident that he likewise works within Mencius' framework, absorbing insights from Neo-Confucianism and developing the Chinese Islamic path of "rectifying the body, clearing the mind, and fulfilling the nature." In Liu's system, body, mind, and nature are fully interconnected. Rectifying the body (zheng shen) entails conforming to external norms of ritual propriety in order to "overcome the self and return to the rites"; clearing the mind (qing xin) is equivalent to "preserving heavenly principle and eliminating human desire," allowing the five inner faculties and seven virtues of the mind to be wholly

revealed; fulfilling the nature (jin xing) means combining the mind's knowing with the body's acting so as to realize the "unity of knowledge and action." In Liu Zhi's conception, these three—normative conduct, purification of the mind, and contemplation of ultimate truth—are three in one: inseparable yet conceptually distinct.

Liu Zhi also acknowledges another path, that of the sages, in which the sequence is reversed—fulfilling the nature → clearing the mind → rectifying the body—but notes that such a path is not gradual cultivation. "When the nature is fulfilled, the mind is clear; when the mind is clear, the body is already upright (Liu, 1994, p.276)." He concludes: "To know the sudden but not the gradual means that the sudden cannot be taken as a method. The sudden transcendence is the path of one or two individuals; the gradual approach is the path of hundreds and thousands (Liu, 1994, p.213)."

Thus, Liu Zhi's teaching emphasizes the gradual path as the realistic route for ordinary people. This division aligns closely with Zhu Xi's own pedagogical model, described in his Great Learning preface:

"At the age of eight, from princes down to the sons of commoners, all enter elementary school to learn the manners of sweeping and serving, the ceremonies of advancing and retreating, and the cultural arts of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and arithmetic. At fifteen, from the heir to the throne down to promising commoners, all enter the great school to study the higher learning of investigating principle, rectifying the mind, cultivating the self, and governing others (Zhu, 1983)."

This illustrates that moral cultivation must proceed step by step: from the basic norms of daily etiquette and cultural learning to the higher moral and political studies aimed at self-cultivation and governance. For ordinary people, "learning to become a sage" is far more important and achievable than the rare ideal of being "a Heaven-born sage." Among Confucians, only Confucius is called "born knowing"; among Muslims, only Muhammad merits such a title—the rest are ordinary human beings. Without the accumulation of gradual cultivation, trying to "ascend from learning to reach innate comprehension" is an empty dream, easily overcome by the flood of desires. As Huang (1985) cautioned in his critique of later Wang Yangming followers: "After the Taizhou school, there were many who could wrestle dragons and snakes with bare hands; by the time it reached Yan Shannong and He Xinyin's school, it could no longer be restrained by the bonds of the moral teaching."

It must be stressed, however, that although Liu Zhi's gongfu structure resembles that of Confucianism, its content cannot be interpreted purely in Confucian terms. Rectifying the body relies on Islamic ritual propriety; clearing the mind means remaining undisturbed by outer distractions, employing the mind's five inner faculties, and manifesting the seven virtues to know the "True One" (God); fulfilling the nature entails uniting knowing and acting, but here "knowing and acting" refers not to the Neo-Confucian "investigating things" or "realizing the innate knowledge of the good," but to knowing God through faith and lived experience, and acting according to Islamic law in obedience to God's will.

In this way, Liu Zhi employs the conceptual structure and moral vocabulary of Confucianism to sinicize the doctrinal system of Sufism, interpreting the stages of Sufi spiritual practice as a

process of moral self-cultivation. As Zhou & et al., (2012) notes, Liu thus constructs a gongfu theory of “unity with difference,” preserving the mystical character of Sufi practice while embedding it within the ethical spirit of Confucian culture. This synthesis not only enriches the teachings of Islam in China but also promotes cultural exchange and mutual transformation between Confucianism and Islam. Liu Zhi’s innovative integration offers a valuable intellectual resource for later scholarship on the relationship between these two traditions.

CONFLICT STATEMENT

I declare no conflict of interest.

COOPERATION STATEMENT

All authors contributed equally to this work and approved the final manuscript.

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