

The Three-Character Rhymed Classic on the Ka‘bah (the Cube of Heaven)

Translated and annotated by J. Peter Hobson

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Because there are Heaven and Earth
the ten thousand creatures are born;
because there are sun and moon
Heaven and Earth have light;
because there is the Sage
enlightening teachings arise.
To hear the teaching of the Sage
is to deepen knowledge and perception,
to know the past,
clearly to understand the future and the present,
to grasp the origin of Heaven and Earth
and the source of the myriad creatures,
to attain to celestial principles
and to see into the hearts of men;
it shows us the road we have come by
and demonstrates the return to Reality;
it makes us aware of our heart and nature
and enables us to penetrate ultimate mysteries;
perpetuated by the wise men of old
it is enshrined in scriptural classics.
The foundation of the Path
is clearly to acknowledge God,¹
not bounded by space
nor limited by form,

1. The Chinese word here translated as “God” is *Chu*, the primary meaning of which is given in Mathews’ Chinese Dictionary as: “A Lord, a master, an owner. A Ruler. To act as Lord.” It should be added, however, that the word is far more frequently used as an element meaning “principal, chief, subjective, essential”, etc., in various compounds. The standard word for “God” as used by Chinese Muslims is *Chen Chu*, “True Lord”; and as used by Catholics is *T’ien Chu*, “Lord of Heaven”.

without end or beginning,
not to be apprehended by the senses,
neither near nor far,
the Uniquely Sublime;²
not empty nothingness
but Truth and Reality,
mysterious and hard to fathom,
beyond definition,
resembling Goodness and Reason,
yet like empty space,
Reality, Truth and Being,
wondrous and beyond description.
If we simply consider Being,
not trying to ponder too deeply,
Being's great attribute
is called Consciousness-Potency,
Consciousness foreshadowing the intelligence of things
and Potency implying forms;
creative change begins
when the archetypes are born;
the Great Command is given³
which is the gate to all marvels;⁴
natures and intelligences are separated out
prefiguring their forms;
the myriad intelligences muster
and the subtle substance forms;
what one calls the Primal Spirit⁵

2. "Uniquely Sublime": the Chinese is *Tu-Sun* which, to most if not all Chinese, has Buddhist associations since, in the Chinese translations of the Sutras, this is the expression used by the Buddha Gautama after his enlightenment beneath the Bo-tree: "Above the Heavens and below the Heavens only I am Uniquely Sublime"—or, "worthy of veneration".

3. The "Great Command": *Ta-Ming*; this must surely be a reference to the Divine Command "Be!" (*Kun* in Arabic.) In Chinese it has echoes of *T'ienming*, usually translated as the "Mandate of Heaven", that is, the celestial authority upon which the rule of the Emperor, the Son of Heaven, is based.

4. The "gate to all marvels": a phrase taken from the first chapter of the Tao-te Ching.

5. The Primal Spirit: (*Yuan Ch'i*) is a Taoist term sometimes translated as "primordial spirit" or "primeval influences". (Chinese does not normally distinguish between singular and plural): it designates the first vitalizing influence in the process of manifestation, and is also conceived of as inhering in human individuals as their essential vitality; in this latter sense it is part of the vocabulary of modern Japanese

is truly all-pervasive
from the limits of the Previous Heaven
to the roots of the Later Heaven;⁶
the male and female principles emerge
and the four elements are manifested
and their celestial and chthonic aspects fixed;
when the myriad forms are complete
they make Man.

Now Man
is the Essence of Heaven and earth;
among the ten thousand transformations
his is a special creation;
the quintessence of Heaven
is Man's heart;
the glory of earth
is his body;
the ten thousand intelligent principles
are Man's essential Nature.
Man's descent into the world
marked a great transformation;
when the first ancestor,
whom we call P'an-ku,⁷
first entered manifestation,
he dwelt in a country of the West,
the land of the Ka'bah,
called *Tā'if*⁸
and then moved his dwelling
and established *Sha-mu* (Syria);⁹

where, meaning "health" or, "healthy" it is pronounced *Genki*. In the present work it is clearly intended to correspond to the Arabic *ar-Rūh*, the spirit.

6. The Previous Heaven: (*Hsien T'ien*) is a Taoist term designating unmanifested creation, the complement of which is the Later Heaven (*Hou T'ien*) which refers to manifested creation, i.e. the present universe and not, as the word might suggest, a future state.

7. P'an-Ku: In Taoist legend P'an-Ku was evolved from chaos and, in dying, gave birth to the universe; he therefore corresponds roughly to the Vedic *Purusa*, but is here equated with Adam.

8. *Tā'if*: in Chinese *T'o-yi-Fu* with a marginal note to the effect that it is a place name.

9. *Sha-Mu*: a marginal note indicates that this is a place name; it appears to be a transliteration of the Arabic *Sham* (more properly *Ash-Sham*), Syria.

he began his teaching
and became a Sage-King,
establishing the Great Path,
determining ethical norms
propagating rites and justice
and pacifying kingdoms and countries.
When manners and the spirit were young
there were many good and wise men
who kept to the ancient Path
and admonished men ceaselessly,
and for many thousands of years
their teaching flourished.
But when men multiplied
and spread to the earth's four quarters,
they abandoned their ancient norms
and lost their primordial goodness;
moved only by selfish ambitions
their speech became immoderate
and the Path of the ancient sages
was gradually corrupted.
The primordial Doctrine was preserved
by the Ka'bah alone;
sage followed sage,
the stream flowed from its source
until it reached our Prophet;
the Path then gleamed with great brightness
and all were conquered by it
and the teaching of the Ka'bah was handed on.¹⁰
The world was full of omens
when the Prophet was born—

10. This extraordinary passage expresses the fact of cyclical decline with what appears to be, on the surface, a very confused reflection of Semitic historical tradition relating to the Mosaic Revelation and the line of Prophets; if its general import is clear, the few place-names it mentions are strange; even stranger perhaps by contrast, is the absence of personal names; not even the Prophet of Islam is mentioned by name. One can only say that to the Chinese, far removed in place and time from familiarity with the Semitic homelands, the metaphysical fact of cyclical decline which necessitated the Islamic Revelation, is more cogent than historical detail and accuracy; or again, that the institution of Sage-hood is more compelling than its personalities. As opposed to this, the obsession with detailed Chinese date cycles and dynasties (which I have not translated) shows how extremely Sinocentric the author is.

the Sage of Sages;
combining all achievement in himself.
To contemplate the symbols of sanctity
is to transcend past and present;
he expounded the ancient doctrines
with the utmost clarity;
the seeds of a great renewal
broke through the decadence;
what had not flowered even in the past
now blossomed forth.
Nothing in the First and Second Heavens
remained obscure.

(There follows a difficult passage giving a brief history of the Prophet according to the nomenclature of the contemporary Chinese dynasties starting in the period Ta-Chien of the Ch'en Dynasty, during which the Prophet was born, and ending with the 'Return to Reality'—i.e., his death, during the Tang Dynasty).

For all lands under Heaven,
the doctrine of the Prophet runs
comprising Rites for human society,
and the Heavenly Path.
To confess the Sovereign God
is the first requirement,
and this central ritual
is most wondrous.
The Heavenly Path is cultivated
by the Five Virtuous Acts:
the Virtuous Act of enunciating the Truth
with the heart turned to God;
the Virtuous Act of ritualizing the Truth
with the body adoring God;
the Virtuous Act of fasting
to master the promptings of desire;
the Virtuous Act of heavenly charity
to assist the orphans and the needy;
and the Virtuous Act of pilgrimage
forsaking home and family.

All things, deep and shallow
reside in the heart and breast.
The virtues of the person
are vehicled by the Rites;¹¹
the virtues of the heart
are vehicled by the Path,¹²
which is therefore called the Vehicle of Reality.¹³
Now the Vehicle of the Rites
is the foundation of all;
the true Vehicle of the Path
is derived from this;
when the Rites are abandoned
the three virtues are obscured.
These five Virtuous Acts
are the five norms.
God commands men
to conquer self
whether they be ignorant or wise,
saints or commoners,
each acting in respectful obedience
as the Rites prescribe
and bearing his own burden
neither relenting nor backsliding;
like the kingdom's constitution
or the monarch's laws,
to offend against them
is a crime hard to pardon.
In contemplating Heaven and Earth
and considering our persons
it behooves us to perceive in all things
the bounty of the True God;
the bounteous mercy of God
is beyond human definition;

11. A marginal note in the original here gives a Chinese transliteration of the Arabic *Sharī'ah*.

12. A marginal note in the original here gives a Chinese transliteration of the Arabic *Tarīqah*.

13. A marginal note in the original here gives a Chinese transliteration of the Arabic *Haqīqah*. The word translated here as “vehicle” is the Chinese word used for the Sanskrit *Yāna*, in Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) and Hinayāna (Lesser Vehicle).

it is weighty as the mountains
and deep as the sea.
The servitor
has no person of his own,
no desires of his own,
no heart of his own,
but fearing the command of God
he cultivates his person assiduously,
makes his intentions sincere
and rectifies his heart.
The ancient name for this
is Purity and Truth;
to be able to conquer self
can be called Purity,
and to return to the Rites determined by Heaven
can be called Truth;
neither to conquer self
nor to return to the Truth
can only be called hypocrisy.
A man has a body
and he has also a heart;
when the body meets objects
emotion and desire are joined;
the heart in relation to human nature
is like the spirit of Heaven;
if the promptings of desire prevail
a man rejoins the birds and beasts;
but if reason masters desire
he becomes a True Man.¹⁴
A man who cultivates goodness
must endeavor to be sincere
to realize in himself the way of the Prophet
and constantly to live the Truth.
The Four great wise men
each have a school
which is guided by the precepts of Heaven
and grounded in the practice of the Prophet;

14. A "True Man": *Chen-Jen* is a Taoist term corresponding to the Arabic *al-insān al-Kāmil* as defined in Sufism.

each one adopts laws
and lays down rules
and has its regulations
and its guiding norms.
Both scholars
and the unlettered people
must hold to these,
and respectfully follow them,
be guided by the scriptures
and rely upon the Vehicle of the Law.
It is absolutely wrong
to act according to personal ambition,
foolishly to think of personal advantage
or simply to pursue private aims,
to behave immoderately or eccentrically,
to embrace heretical doctrines,
to claim supernatural psychic powers
or to boast of commerce with spirits
and thus, by deceiving the ignorant,
to seek a vain reputation
or, by falsifying the rites
to confuse the doctrinal schools;
this is like gilding base metal
or minting forged silver,
like selling dog's flesh
placarded as mutton;
and bragging loudly
to deceive folk
means that those who are misled
are irreparably harmed;
these kinds of thing
offend against Purity and Truth¹⁵
like a venomous poison
or a pestilence;
to take note and avoid them
is the beginning of a life of peace.
To offend against God and the Prophet

15. "Purity and Truth": the expression "Teaching of Purity and Truth" is a common Chinese designation for Islam.

to disregard the scriptural classics¹⁶
and to neglect fasting and worship,
means gradually losing one's balance.
Not to cultivate one's person
but simply to cultivate the heart
by striving inwardly
whilst neglecting outward practices
is truly abhorrent,
and one who behaves like this
may have the form of a man
but is really a sorcerous devil;
to fall into this error
is to suffer ineradicable harm.
The things that destroy virtue
are indeed innumerable
but it is the animal instinct
that casts the tightest net;
to master its lusts
is most difficult,
and herein lies the difference
between the commoner and the saint—
that only the saint can destroy his passions
and become truly good;
the man who is swayed by passion
is benighted beyond endurance.
To control wayward desire
is to hold back a raging torrent,
or to restrain a savage steed
by tightening the reins,
and the slightest inattention
spells outright disaster;
for lust is like a fire
that cannot be contained
and none who meet it
can escape its harm;

16. The “Scriptural Classics”: this is specifically plural, literally the “multitudinous Classics” (*Ch'un Ching*), perhaps referring to the collection of Hadith.

longing desire
is the heart's plague,
the destroyer of all virtues
and the root of the ten thousand evils;
every yearning attachment
that springs from this
can be cured if caught early,
but if there is delay the cure is hard.
Desire is to reason
as darkness is to light;
wrong and right
cannot walk together
for compromise between them
cripples them both;
the leanings of desire
are for the lowly dust,
and a man conquered by lust
is a man confused and lost.
A man laid low by wine
lies in unrelieved stupor
discomforted till morning's end
and forgetful of time's passing,
with no repose by day
nor rest by night,
hoping for a filling meal and warmth
and fearing hunger and cold.
What most men seek
is an untroubled life,
be they simple people
or officials—
one sleep by night,
two meals by day;
whether to use delicious flavorings
or to eat coarse grains,
to wear embroidered robes
or to dress in cotton,
to dwell in a splendid mansion
or to inhabit a hut of reeds—
men discuss their respective merits
without any compromise;

(the heart loves victory
and the will would prevail!)
but to abandon what is easy
and to seek what is hard,
to build many-storied pavilions,
to lay out flowered mansions,
to order brocaded robes,
to don rich satins,
or to prepare banquets
with rare and extravagant dishes
—all these are weariness of soul
and can only be deplored.
This world of floating dust
—do not long for it!
its poverty is brief,
its wealth does not endure.
The ranked lords and nobles
attendant upon courtiers and kings
pass, in a few score years,
to the isles of the dead.¹⁷
The heroes of old
in their many thousands
were, in their days of fame,
a glorious company
like storm and thunder,
renowned for cold courage,
but before very long
the sun had melted their frost.
From past to present
who has lived forever?
The great, rich and noble
die upon a morning;
wives and children
all tread the same road,
interred in a lonely grave,

17. “The oceans of the dead”: literally “proceed to the Eastern Ocean”, a reference to the Taoist tradition of the Isles of the Blessed that lie in the ocean off China.

or buried on a moorland waste,
friendless by day,
no companion by night.
If we consider this carefully
it is truly saddening.
Things great and small
are as Heaven decrees them;
what Heaven has commanded
can never be pre-empted;
no man is free
to plan profit and loss;
each has an allotted position
not to be striven against;
a man's appointed lot
is like his face
which, whether beautiful or ugly,
is Heaven's gift
and he cannot alter it;
nor can he change his fate.
Material prosperity is to happiness
as water to the cup;
though the cup be full
there may still be a sense of loss;
not to achieve one's promise
is like a crack in the cup
which, soon filled,
is swiftly emptied.
A man's nobility
resides in his heart
and if his breath and blood are sound
the heart will be bright;
if his nourishment is correct
his breath and blood will be pure,
and thus all his food
must be chosen with care,
for wholesome nourishment
profits morality
as medicine and acupuncture
benefit the body.
To hurt the feelings of others

in order to benefit oneself,
to promote one's own ambitions
against the ordinances of Heaven
may achieve immediate aims
but is mere self-deceit,
truly deplorable,
really to be regretted.
If one wishes to practice virtue,
one must first desist from evil;
first guard one's diet
and later take the medicine.
If one eats what is illegal
virtue will not result;
if one is clogged with food
no medicine will be effective;
to choose good and wholesome food
is a basis of virtue;
to eat what is impure
brings impure desires to birth;
when lewdness operates
the harm extends to the heart,
like every kind of poison
which can damage the body.
When the body has a sickness
all men grow alarmed;
but when the heart has a blemish
they feel self-satisfied;
this sort of thing
is intolerable foolishness.
Being born into the world
we must not be like the beasts.
Man and beast—
it is the heart that distinguishes them;
between them there is reason
which brings awareness.
The sages and wise men of old
expounded their doctrines clearly
embracing both Heaven and earth
and linking past and present.
Although their words were simple

their import was truly deep.
The doctrines of the Ka‘bah
pervade the Confucian Classics
and have been handed down over a myriad ages
to dispel ignorance and obscurity;
all scholars
should treat them with the utmost respect,
ponder them deeply
and analyze them with a clear mind.
Born into this world,
how can we treat life trivially,
and simply entreat the spirits
to protect us?
If we consider our persons
and who it was created us,
it is easy to perceive the Truth
and we must not withhold our gratitude
but we must worship the true God,
assiduously cultivate our persons,
be loyal always, and filial to parents,
make our intentions sincere,
regret faults and shortcomings,
and seek forgiveness,
for God pardons faults,
and bestows bliss,
raising us to the portals of Heaven
in inexpressible beatitude.
So mark this well!
The doctrine of Purity and Truth is good;
strive then with all your strength
to realize the Supreme Path.

Translator’s Commentary

The work of which I have attempted the above translation was unearthed from a dusty file in the New York Public Library when, in late 1975, I went there to look for Islamic literature in Chinese for the purpose of the World of Islam Festival. Printed in the typical format of a Chinese folded book, in sturdy, but not inelegant, wood-block characters, it bore no explanatory notes

other than its author was Ma Fu-ch'u and that its probable date of composition was the early 18th Century. Its interpretation must therefore rest upon its contents.

Its form is not unfamiliar to students of things Chinese: it is a didactic poem in lines of three characters with a rhyme at the end of every second line, easily memorized, condensed and epigrammatical, without any internal divisions into sections or paragraphs and, as always, without punctuation. It is not hard to imagine groups of children reciting it by rote in the time-honored fashion, in China and elsewhere, of learning what is most fundamental by committing texts to memory; that this was, in part, its purpose is suggested by its being designated a "classic" (*ching*), a term applied to the seminal texts of Taoist and Buddhist learning and to the Mahayana Sutras.

And what of its content? It is very Chinese in every way. In the first place it employs the common vocabulary of Chinese metaphysics and morality, terms that are the fabric of the main strands of Chinese thought, be they Taoist, Confucian or Buddhist; certain phrases echo the Tao-te Ching or are even taken from it as they stand; others are specifically Confucian, especially those relating to moral standards; others, and indeed almost predominantly when speaking of life's transitoriness and of "Virtuous Acts", are familiar Buddhist expressions. By contrast there appears to be very little specifically Muslim terminology:¹⁸ the Prophet of Islam is not mentioned by name—which seems remarkable—and the word "Sage", which is used instead—although here I translate it as "Prophet"—has Taoist and Confucian connotations; there appears to be no specific mention of the Qur'an; in the passage which, because of the obscurity of certain place-names and the difficulty of calculating Chinese dates, I have left un-translated, the only events mentioned are the birth of the Prophet, his "accession to his rank", the Night Journey, the emigration to Medinah and the death of the Prophet; in this passage, which is filled—in the fashion of Chinese histories—with the complicated terminology of dynasties and their cycles,

18. This observation has to be qualified: it may well be that many words and expressions of Taoist and Buddhist origin have simply been taken over to become, in the Islamic context, accepted Islamic terminology; such indeed are the expressions *Chen-Chu* (True Lord) for "God" and *Sheng* (Sage, or Saint) for "Prophet". However there are no words that are based on, or taken from, the Arabic; and this is significantly different from the situation in the rest of the Islamic World where Arabic technical vocabulary has been absorbed into all the regional languages of Islam, viz. Persian, Urdu, Bengali, Malay, Hausa, Swahili etc., Arguably, the linguistic barriers between monosyllabic Chinese and the triconsonantal structure of Arabic were impassable. Nonetheless, a whole range of Buddhist terminology was brought into Chinese based upon the actual transliteration of polysyllabic Sanskrit; the linguistic barriers did not prove impassable in that case. Of course the scale was different in two respects: firstly Buddhism became a universal creed in China and not that of a minority; secondly the sheer mass and complexity of the Sanskrit Mahayana corpus necessitated a task of translation that is probably unrivalled for sheer size. Since the Muslim rites are everywhere performed in Arabic, perhaps—paradoxically—there was no need to translate terms but simply, as appears to have happened, to use existing Chinese terminology to elucidate meanings outside the context of the actual rites of worship.

there is nothing of the events of the Prophetic Mission that one might have expected, nothing of the political vicissitudes, battles, the conquest of Mecca or the subsequent Muslim victories. Military matters are not highly regarded in the Chinese tradition.

Secondly, it is very Chinese in the sense that it begins, after a brief introduction on the nature of sanctity and a sage's teaching, by describing the "foundation of the Path" (*Tao*) and the nature of God (*Chu*); in other words it touches first upon what is most principial and, as it were, abstract; it then moves on from first principles to their doctrinal and moral consequences in a manner that is both typically Chinese and, one might say, characteristically esoteric.

Is it then a work of esoterism? Is it a Chinese Sufi treatise? Certainly, one feels that the author must have belonged to a Sufi order. To whom then was the work addressed? Its three-character, rhymed form suggests that it was intended to be memorized by the young; the sections describing the Five Pillars of the Faith—the Five Virtuous Acts—and the fundamental moral principles read like an introductory text for the young or, again—and here is surely the clue—to the non-Muslim.

It has to be remembered that Islam in China is the religion of a minority, especially in the Han, i.e. the truly ethnic Chinese, areas. The fact that this work is written in Chinese and not in the language of one of the non-Chinese races within the Chinese Empire, who would constitute a Muslim majority in their own area, reinforces the picture of a minority surrounded by people whose faith is shaped by the Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist traditions. In such a situation it would be important to preserve the faith and practice of the young and to justify it vis-à-vis the non-Muslim, so powerful and compelling is the Chinese tradition and way of life.

The form of exposition which the author resorts to is such as to appeal to, and be respectfully received by, persons whose thinking and feeling are formed in, and by, Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist norms; it appears to be attuned, as it were, to the flexible Far Eastern mentality that is at home with the perennial and universal. The Confucian scholar is urged to see in the "doctrine of the Ka'bah" the morality of the Confucian Canon; the Buddhist is reminded of the transience of this "world of floating dust"; the Taoist, living within the climate of Yin and Yang (the female and male principles) and Taoist cosmology is presented with concepts, and a vocabulary, of metaphysics that are familiar to him. Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist—the traditional Chinese is all these things and is constrained so to be by the very nature of the language he speaks; this does not preclude particular points of emphasis upon one or the other of them, but there are no rigid, fideist barriers; and this must be true also of a Muslim born and raised in the Chinese environment and speaking a language which in its daily vocabulary bears the imprint and flavor of China's rich past.

For a Chinese Muslim this environment would bear both dangers and opportunities—the dangers of laxity and being assimilated to the point of losing his Muslim identity on the one hand, and the opportunities of broadening his faith to a perennial perspective, and thus to a deeper understanding, on the other.

I think that the present work is addressed to both eventualities, with an emphasis upon the latter and with an appeal to the non-Muslim, if not for adherence, at least for sympathetic understanding; the last four lines:

“So mark this well!
The doctrine of purity and Truth is good;
strive then with all your strength
to realize the Supreme Path”.

surely confirm this; in the last line of all, the word “realize” is *Wu*, which would be read in Japanese “*satori*”, the familiar designation for “realization” or “enlightenment” in Zen; the “Supreme Path” (*Chihtao*) refers to the spiritual path as such, whatever the perspective from which it is approached.

Nonetheless, it should not be thought that this work is simply “syncretist”, for it is quite orthodox in the following determining respects: it affirms without equivocation that the basis of the Spiritual Path is the acknowledgement of “God” (*Chu*, the “Lord” the “Principle”), the disciplined performance of the of the Canonical Rites and adherence to the prescribed norms of daily life; it condemns involvement in the inward Path without its necessary outward foundation, saying that this would lead to sorcery; it insists moreover upon the validity of each of the Four Schools of Law, without confusion between them. In this sense it demands Islamic conformity.

I wish I knew more about the author, but his work speaks for him, as does also his name, Ma Fu-ch’u. This is not immediately discernible as a Muslim name, for it is not Arabic or recognizably derived from Arabic, and it conforms to the Chinese convention of a family name followed by a given name consisting, as is usual, of two characters. *Ma* is the most common family name in Muslim China and corresponds to Muhammad of which it is a distant, monosyllabic contraction; *Fu-ch’u* means “restoring—or returning to—the beginning”. The name must surely bespeak the man.

And is it not moving to think that ultimately three great spiritual treasuries have contributed their gifts to fashion this work—the Revelations of the Indian, the Chinese and the Semitic worlds?

At the first glance we appear to be confronted simply with a sinicized Islam. Much as the beautiful mosques of China share the architectural vocabulary of soaring swallow-wing roofs, tipped eaves, beams of plain, carved or lacquered wood, pavilions, landscaped gardens and courtyards, so here we see Islam sharing the common vocabulary of the Chinese tradition and being expounded, with not a little beauty, in terms that are characteristically Chinese and, at the same time, redolent of the *Religio Perennis*.

If, at a first glance, this seems paradoxical, a second glance will surely show that the paradox is only apparent.