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Ritual slaughter in Chinese Islam: intelligibility, legitimacy, and moral restraint in the Han Kitab writings of Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi, and Ma Zhu

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Abstract. This article examines the practice of ritual animal slaughter as discussed in the writings of three prominent Han Kitab scholars: Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi, and Ma Zhu. Rather than treating slaughter regulations solely as technical rules governing halal production, this article argues that these scholars understood ritual slaughter as a form of self-cultivation. Through adherence to proper procedures, Muslims cultivate self-discipline, restrain personal desires, and shape moral conduct within the framework of Islamic law. Existing scholarship has focused largely on how Chinese-language Islamic texts interpret theology, philosophy, and self-cultivation through Chinese intellectual traditions, with less attention to how Islamic thought manifests in everyday religious practice. Ritual slaughter offers a valuable lens for exploring the relationship between religious law, bodily conduct, consumption, and ethical formation. Analysis of the writings of Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi, and Ma Zhu demonstrates how legal slaughter functions as a practice of moral cultivation. Wang Daiyu links slaughter and purification to eliminating selfish desires; Liu Zhi emphasizes obedience to divine command and correct ritual procedure, while Ma Zhu highlights compassion for animals and moral constraints. Together, their works show that ritual slaughter integrates religious knowledge, embodied practice, and ethical self-mastery, illustrating how Chinese Islamic writings endowed everyday religious practices with moral significance.

Keywords: ritual slaughter, Islamic law, self-cultivation, Chinese Islamic thought

1. Introduction

In late Ming and Qing China, ritual slaughter had become more than a mere matter of food; it became a focal point of conflict between Islamic dietary customs and broader issues such as agriculture, moral governance, and social order. Gu Yanwu (1613–1682), for example, sharply criticized the regular slaughter of cattle by Muslims, writing: "The Son of Heaven does not kill cattle without cause. Yet today the Hui kill cattle for food throughout the day. This should be prohibited first, so that their foreign customs may gradually be transformed" [1]. His criticism reflects the broader perceived significance of animal slaughter in late imperial China, where it was closely connected to concerns about agriculture, moral governance, and social order. Although existing research has extensively explored how Chinese Muslim scholars draw upon the Chinese

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intellectual tradition to interpret Islamic theology, philosophy, and concepts of self-cultivation, few scholars have regarded religious slaughter as a practical domain for the shaping of the body and ethics, and even fewer studies have focused on how religious norms are implemented in daily life through repeated acts of self-restraint and self-discipline. Ritual slaughter, or Islamic slaughter (dhabīḥa) [2], refers to the religiously prescribed slaughter of animals for human consumption according to specific Islamic requirements concerning the permissibility of consuming the animal, the procedure of slaughter, and the invocation of God's name. Since these regulations not only govern which animals are permissible for consumption but also prescribe how animals should be slaughtered, religious slaughter offers a crucial perspective for examining how Islamic law shapes daily life and ethical concepts within specific social and political contexts. In late imperial China, these requirements took on particular significance because animal slaughter was not regarded as morally neutral or simply a technical matter. Cattle, in particular, as an indispensable source of labor in agricultural production, were often subject to legal restrictions and moral criticism regarding their slaughter. The consumption of beef could raise concerns about agricultural production, benevolent governance, social order, and cruelty. At the same time, in the public consciousness, the slaughter and meat-eating practices of Muslims may have further highlighted their religious and cultural differences. Against this broader context, the Han Kitab provides an important body of evidence for examining how Chinese Muslim scholars understood and gave ethical meaning to these practices. This article addresses these questions by examining the works of three prominent authors of Chinese-language Islamic texts: Wang Daiyu (c. 1584–1670), Ma Zhu (1640–1711), and Liu Zhi (c. 1660–c. 1730). The article focuses on three interconnected dimensions of ritual slaughter: Wang Daiyu's emphasis on purity and self-discipline, Liu Zhi's focus on divine authority and proper ritual practice, and Ma Zhu's attention to compassion and restraint. When read together, their writings make clear that ritual slaughter was understood not simply as a dietary or legal requirement, but as a practice through which Muslims cultivated bodily discipline and moral character.

Existing scholarship on the Han Kitab has helped piece together important accounts of the intellectual work of Chinese Muslim scholars. Much of this scholarship has examined the project commonly described as "*yiru shiyi*" (以儒释伊), or "explaining Islam through Confucian principles", particularly in terms of conceptual translation, philosophical adaptation, and the development of a Chinese Muslim scholarly tradition.

Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, for example, has moved beyond the overly straightforward idea that Islam was being "integrated" into Chinese culture. By examining teacher-student relationships, scholarly networks, and the circulation of books among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chinese Muslim intellectuals, he argues that the Han Kitab should not be viewed simply as evidence of Islam's assimilation into China. Instead, Muslim scholars drew on established Chinese systems of learning, literary forms, and intellectual vocabularies to develop Islam as a distinct scholarly tradition [3].

Studies of individual Han Kitab authors have further shown how this process of intellectual translation worked. Frankel demonstrates how Liu Zhi used concepts from Confucian and other Chinese traditions to explain Islamic teachings about God, law, and moral order within the intellectual world of late imperial China [4]. Lee similarly shows that Liu Zhi drew on Neo-Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist resources to express Sufi ideas in ways that Chinese readers could understand [5]. Murata established how Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi connected Islamic cosmology and Sufi understandings of human nature with Chinese traditions of self-cultivation [6]. These studies provide a foundation for understanding how Chinese Muslim scholars articulated Islamic ideas through Chinese intellectual resources.

The relationship between religious knowledge and ethical behavior has also long been a key topic in the study of religious self-cultivation. Although existing research on the Han Kitab has revealed important aspects

of its philosophy and spiritual cultivation, studies on ethical formation offer a complementary perspective that helps us understand how religious practices contribute to the cultivation of an individual's moral character. For example, Saba Mahmood explored how embodied religious practices and repetitive acts of self-discipline contribute to the formation of ethical subjects. Her research emphasizes that religious obligations may not only regulate an individual's external behavior but may also further shape the practitioner's own moral inclinations and inner character [7]. This theoretical perspective also raises a question worthy of further exploration in Han Kitab studies: How do Chinese Muslim scholars connect the philosophical and spiritual ideals of self-cultivation to the behavioral norms of specific religious practices?

Ritual slaughter provides a particularly useful entry point for exploring this issue, as it brings together Islamic religious obligations, bodily practices, and moral discipline. The religious regulations governing lawful slaughter not only specify which animals may be consumed but also set requirements for the specific methods of slaughter, including adherence to a particular procedure and the invocation of Allah's name. More importantly, although ritual slaughter is a practice permitted under Islamic law, its implementation remains subject to ethical norms. Therefore, by examining how Chinese Muslim scholars understand and interpret these religious regulations, we can further explore how self-cultivation transcends philosophical reflection and extends into the regulation and restraint of bodily actions, personal desires, and moral responsibilities in everyday religious life.

The writings of Liu Zhi, Ma Zhu, and Wang Daiyu offer three complementary perspectives for understanding the relationship between religious practice and moral self-cultivation. In Liu Zhi's discourse, the slaughterer must invoke the name of Allah and follow the correct slaughtering procedure. This implies that the legitimacy of the act of slaughter depends on obedience to divine commandments, rather than on personal desire. Ma Zhu, by emphasizing the sentience of animals, introduces ethical requirements of compassion and restraint into the practice of lawful slaughter. Finally, Wang Daiyu's discussion of blood and purity, along with his distinction between "slaughtering external animals" and "slaughtering internal animals", links the specific physical act of slaughter to the process of self-cultivation aimed at overcoming one's own selfish desires.

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that self-cultivation in the Han Kitab is not limited to philosophical reflection or the ideal of spiritual cultivation, but is equally reflected in the norms and constraints governing behaviors permitted by religion. In this regard, ritual slaughter provides a particularly noteworthy example, as the fact that religion permits humans to slaughter animals does not mean that this act is free from moral constraints. On the contrary, believers must still consider how to carry out lawful acts in an appropriate manner, as well as the ethical responsibilities that accompany these acts. By examining the relationship between religious permission and moral discipline, this paper further contributes to the academic discourse on self-cultivation, emphasizing that ethical formation involves not only the restraint from prohibited acts but is also reflected in how individuals exercise the lawful rights granted by religion and how they cultivate a sense of moral responsibility in the process.

By bringing together the writings of Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi, and Ma Zhu, this article also offers a broader understanding of "*yiru shiyi*" (以儒释伊). Chinese intellectual resources served not only to make Islamic beliefs and doctrines intelligible to Chinese readers, but also to articulate the ethical significance of religious practices within the social and intellectual context of late imperial China.

2. Wang Daiyu: slaughter as purification and self-discipline

One problem Wang Daiyu addresses is the linguistic distance between Islamic scriptures and Chinese readers. He clearly states:

"There is no lack of Islamic scriptures, but those outside the religion are unable to understand them because the written languages are different" [8] (researcher's translation).

It is because of this linguistic difference that non-Muslim readers, when encountering Islam, may find it difficult to fully grasp the core of its teachings. Interestingly, Wang Daiyu describes his writing style as using one language to express another tradition's teachings, essentially "borrowing" existing Chinese vocabulary and concepts. He used Chinese expressions familiar to his readers to explain religious principles, but these principles themselves, both in origin and in essence, retained their Islamic character. Wang explains:

"All flying creatures are formed from water, earth, fire, and air. Their blood and '*qi*' are transformations of these four elements. In slaughtering an animal, its blood and '*qi*' are removed in order to cleanse the root of its harmful conditions" [8].

Wang Daiyu's use of the term "*qi*" here is highly significant; it should be retained in its original pinyin form rather than translated as "energy", "air", or "vital force". As Li has noted, within the discourse of Chinese philosophy, "*qi*" carries multiple meanings with rich historical layers spanning cosmology, physiology, psychology, and ethics that cannot be fully conveyed by a single English word [9]. This semantic complexity is particularly important in Wang Daiyu's works. He frequently borrows existing Chinese philosophical terminology to explain Islamic concepts, while simultaneously imbuing these terms with new meanings within this Islamic framework. Recent research also emphasizes that Wang Daiyu's use of Chinese terminology is not simply an equation of Islamic concepts with their Chinese counterparts. Rather, he utilizes familiar Chinese expressions to make Islamic doctrines more easily understood while preserving their unique connotations [10].

In this context, blood and "*qi*" (血气) should not be understood merely as physiological blood and its accompanying "energy". By describing blood and "*qi*" as transformations of the four elements, Wang places them within a broader account of the constitution of created beings. Thus, when he describes slaughter as the removal of blood and "*qi*", he is not simply referring to the physical draining of an animal's blood. Likewise, "cleanse" (净) should not be understood solely in terms of hygienic cleanliness.

The phrase "the root of harmful conditions" (恶缘之本) points instead to a deeper process in which the problematic aspects of the animal's embodied constitution are removed, thereby transforming the animal's condition and rendering it suitable for consumption. Thus, slaughter stopped being a technical operation to end an animal's life and became an act with religious significance, aimed at making the animal's flesh suitable for legal consumption. The key role of "*qi*" here lies in its ability to connect the animal's physiological structure with Wang Daiyu's broader concept of purification. Through this connection, the act of slaughter itself acquires ethical and religious significance.

This understanding of "blood" and "*qi*" can also be viewed within the context of China's broader ritual traditions. The "*Jiao Te Sheng*" (郊特牲) chapter in the *Book of Rites* states:

"Blood was offered because it contained '*qi*' in its fullness. The lungs, liver, and heart were offered because they were valued as the principal locations of '*qi*'" [11].

This passage provides an important point of comparison for Wang Daiyu's discussion of blood and "*qi*". While both texts connect blood and "*qi*" with the embodied life of the animal, they assign them different ritual functions. In the *Book of Rites (Liji)*, blood possesses sacrificial value because it contains abundant "*qi*" (vital energy) and is therefore used as an offering. Conversely, in Wang Daiyu's discourse, blood and "*qi*" are removed through slaughter, a necessary step for the legal consumption of animals.

This contrast does not mean that Wang Daiyu directly borrowed the conceptual framework of the *Book of Rites*, but rather that familiar terms like "blood" and "*qi*" can carry different meanings in different ritual systems. Wang Daiyu borrowed recognizable conceptual terms from the Chinese intellectual tradition, but

reinterpreted them, placing them within the Islamic framework of legal slaughter and purification. In short, this contrast helps reveal the core characteristic of his translation of thought: He used concepts familiar to Chinese readers to explain Islamic dietary norms, but did not simplify them into existing Chinese ritual models.

Wang's explanation of slaughter does not end with the animal's body. He further distinguishes between "outer slaughter" and "inner slaughter":

"One must understand that there are inner and outer animals. In slaughtering the outer animal, one must not abandon the old rules. One follows sacred law and puts an end to one's private cleverness. In slaughtering the inner animal, one subdues the self and follows the sage without interruption" [8].

This distinction is important for understanding how Wang connects ritual practice with moral cultivation. "Outer slaughter" refers to the actual slaughter of an animal, but Wang does not treat it as a purely physical act. It must be carried out according to established sacred rules, without allowing personal judgment to cloud or override them. His phrases "not abandoning the old rules" (不遗旧典) and "restraining one's own cleverness" (杜己聪明) are especially important. The first emphasizes obedience to established religious norms, while the second calls on the individual to restrain personal opinions and judgments. Lawful slaughter therefore requires not only following the correct procedure but also giving up the idea that one can interpret religious rules according to one's own understanding.

The phrasing of "inner slaughter", by contrast, turns this discipline toward the self. Through the phrases "subduing the self" (降伏自性) and "following the sage" (体圣人), Wang shifts from regulating the treatment of the animal to regulating the desires and impulses of the person performing the slaughter. Thus, the "inner animal" is not a literal animal to be killed, but a way of describing the part of the self that must be brought under control. In this sense, inner slaughter does not replace the external act of slaughter. Rather, it extends the discipline of slaughter from the animal's body to the human self.

Ultimately, the relationship between external slaughter and internal slaughter is not a simple analogy, nor merely a progression from external practice to internal cultivation; rather, they are complementary. External slaughter defines the boundaries of legitimate behavior, while internal slaughter constrains those who act within those boundaries. The former prevents personal judgment from transgressing sacred law, while the latter prevents ritual practice from becoming disconnected from self-cultivation. Wang Daiyu thus incorporates religious law and moral self-discipline into the same framework: One must both follow the external rules of legitimate slaughter and learn self-restraint.

What Wang Daiyu does not explicitly assert is that merely following external rules without internal cultivation will reduce the ritual to a mechanical action; this would require further interpretation from his discourse. However, his argument does show that mere external compliance is insufficient for fully grasping the meaning of slaughter, because he immediately connects external behavior with the requirement of "self-restraint". At the same time, internal cultivation cannot replace external religious law, because Wang Daiyu insists that the slaughterer must follow sacred rules while simultaneously restraining personal "intelligence".

Therefore, these two dimensions are interdependent: religious law guides human behavior, while internal self-discipline shapes how people obey and execute such laws. Through this connection, Wang Daiyu views slaughter not only as a rule regulating the slaughter of animals, but also as a practice shaping the moral subjectivity of the person performing the slaughter. Thus, ritual slaughter becomes another conduit of ethical cultivation: by following religious law, restraining the body and exercising self-control in the process, the butcher turns lawful conduct into moral practice.

The "*Ji Tong*" (祭统) chapter of the *Book of Rites* similarly emphasizes the need to control both the mind and the body in ritual practice:

"The mind must not think carelessly but must follow the Way. The hands and feet must not move carelessly but must follow ritual" [12].

This passage offers a useful point of comparison with Wang Daiyu's distinction between "outer slaughter" and "inner slaughter". Rather than suggesting a direct conceptual parallel, the *Book of Rites* helps show that ritual can involve both external performance and the discipline of the ritual actor. The basis of that discipline, however, differs; the *Book of Rites* draws on the Dao, ritual norms, and inherited sacrificial traditions, whereas Wang grounds it in divine revelation, prophetic teachings, and Islamic law. The comparison clearly highlights how Wang places bodily and inner discipline within a distinctly Islamic framework.

This comparison does not imply that Wang Daiyu directly borrowed the concept of "inner and outer cultivation" from the *Book of Rites*. Rather, it illustrates how he utilized concepts already familiar to Chinese readers to explain Islamic ritual norms. He wove together several seemingly disparate aspects of the slaughter process—handling the animal's body, adhering to divine law, and restraining personal desires and judgments—into a unified whole. In doing so, slaughter was transformed from a mere technical regulation regarding "how to kill" into a means for believers to learn obedience to religious authority, curb personal preferences, and cultivate the self. Through this approach, Wang Daiyu linked the external requirements of lawful slaughter with the internal cultivation of moral self-discipline.

3. Liu Zhi: ritual slaughter as obedience to God

Compared with Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi [13] more explicitly addressed non-Muslim readers who were familiar with Chinese traditions but unfamiliar with Islamic rituals. His "*Tianfang Dianli*" (天方典礼), a systematic account of Islamic ritual practice and religious observance written for a Chinese intellectual audience, provides a particularly useful example of how Islamic rituals were explained through concepts and categories familiar to educated Chinese readers.

In the preface to the Tianfang Dianli, Yang Feilu [13] explained that Chinese people and Muslims could meet one another but nevertheless remained unable to understand one another. As a result, some Chinese readers believed that Islamic rituals were shocking, strange, or contrary to ordinary human feeling. Therefore, Liu Zhi's task was not only to translate obscure religious terms, but also to explain why those seemingly strange Islamic customs had a reasonable religious and ethical basis. In his own preface, Liu Zhi [13] explicitly describes his use of Confucian language as part of his method of explaining Islam:

"When those of limited learning doubted clear principles, I examined them through Confucian language to resolve their doubts. When those of narrow understanding regarded ordinary matters as strange, I also used questions and answers to dispel their confusion" [13].

This passage is particularly significant because Liu Zhi himself regarded "Confucian language" as a deliberate method of explanation. He used familiar ethical concepts effectively to make Islamic teachings comprehensible to readers who were acquainted with the "Three Teachings" but unfamiliar with Islam. This does not mean that he equated Confucianism with Islam. On the contrary, he uses familiar Chinese concepts as a linguistic tool to make Islamic rituals understandable—rituals whose authority remained rooted in Islamic law and divine commandments. Liu Zhi's explicit discussion of "Confucian language" indicates that his use of Chinese ethical terminology is a deliberate interpretive strategy, rather than an accidental occurrence in the writing of Chinese-language Islamic texts.

In explaining slaughter, Liu states:

"In every act of animal slaughter, the two throats and two tendons must be cut, and the name of God must be recited. To recite the name of God means to slaughter in obedience to God's command" [13].

This revealing passage combines physical actions, verbal recitation, and religious intention. The butcher must cut the animal according to prescribed methods while reciting the name of God, thus demonstrating that the act is performed in accordance with divine command. This requirement of "divinely ordained slaughter" is particularly crucial because it raises a fundamental question: What grants humans the right to take animal lives? In Liu Zhi's view, the answer lies not in human power, personal needs, or subjective preferences, but in God's will: it is God's will that establishes the legitimacy of slaughtering animals for food and defines the boundaries of this act. This emphasis places the butcher, rather than the animal itself, at the core of Liu Zhi's ethical concerns.

Prescribed methods constrain physical behavior, reciting the name of God constrains speech and intent, and God's will provides ultimate authority for the act of slaughter. Therefore, legal slaughter is a practice of self-discipline, through which believers learn to submit their physical actions and personal desires to God's authority. This point becomes clearer in Liu's discussion of food more generally. He writes:

"Food and drink are what human beings depend upon in order to live, but people cannot simply consume everything without making distinctions. The sages selected what was good and rejected what was harmful. They ate what could be eaten, while things that could not be eaten were given other uses [14]".

Liu begins with a basic fact of human life: that people need food to survive. Yet this need does not give people unlimited freedom to consume whatever they desire. The distinction between what may and may not be eaten must follow the teachings of the sages. In this sense, the judgment involved in eating is not simply an individual decision based on personal taste or appetite. It is a process of learning, recognizing, and following distinctions established by religious authority. Eating thus becomes more than a biological necessity; it is a form of bodily discipline through which people learn to restrain their desires and bring everyday practices into conformity with religious rules.

In Liu Zhi's broader understanding of legitimate food, this connection between slaughter and consumption is crucial. The same principle that legitimizes slaughter also restricts consumption: Humans can use animals as food, but only within the boundaries established by divine commandments and passed down through religious doctrine. Hence, the key issue is not whether people have the ability or desire to consume a particular food, but whether their actions conform to the boundaries set by religious authority. Through this framework, Liu Zhi transforms dietary practice into a moral constraint wherein the body, appetite, and daily choices are all placed under religious guidance. The "*Wang Zhi*" chapter of the *Book of Rites* states:

"Without sufficient cause, a feudal lord did not kill an ox, a great officer did not kill a sheep, an officer did not kill a dog or pig, and a common person did not eat delicacies" [15].

The phrase "without sufficient cause" suggests that the killing of an animal should be connected to a legitimate ritual or social occasion rather than personal desire. This provides an important point of comparison with Liu Zhi's discussion, since both distinguish lawful or justified slaughter from arbitrary killing: An animal cannot be killed simply because a person wishes to do so. The basis of this justification, however, differs between the two traditions. The *Book of Rites* connects the right to kill animals to social status, ritual occasions, and the proper ordering of society, whereas Liu Zhi grounds it in divine command, prophetic teachings, and Islamic law.

The Confucian classics could therefore provide Chinese readers with a familiar principle—that the killing of an animal requires legitimate authorization—without replacing the divine authority at the center of Liu Zhi's argument. For Liu Zhi, the ultimate question is not simply whether there is a sufficient reason to kill, but whether that reason is authorized by God.

This distinction also clarifies the role of ritual norms in Liu Zhi's discourse. His requirements regarding intention, recitation of the name of God, and prescribed methods of slaughter are not merely instructions on

how to slaughter livestock; they also constrain the person performing the slaughter. Therefore, legal slaughter requires the believer's words, actions, and even inner thoughts to align with God's will. In this sense, Liu Zhi's use of Chinese ritual language allows Chinese readers to understand Islamic slaughter norms while preserving their unique source of authority. More importantly, he presents legal slaughter as a form of self-cultivation, through which believers learn to restrain personal desires and situate daily eating and slaughtering within a higher religious order.

Of course, Liu Zhi's discourse does not prove that he was directly responding to the Qing Dynasty's restrictions on livestock slaughter, nor does it indicate that his interpretation actually changed government officials' attitudes toward Muslims. What he does offer is an interpretation of the legality of slaughter from within Islam, presented in ritual language understandable to educated Chinese readers. Reciting the name of God, following the prescribed methods of slaughter, and distinguishing between permitted and prohibited foods—these requirements impose restrictions on individual desires and choices, ensuring that the act of slaughter does not degenerate into an expression of uncontrolled desire, but remains subordinate to divine authority and religious discipline.

This emphasis shifts the discussion of slaughter from the question of whether an animal may be killed to the question of how a lawful killing should be performed. The legitimacy of the act does not arise from human appetite or practical necessity alone, but from its conformity with God's command. In this sense, Liu Zhi presents Islamic dietary law as a form of moral discipline: By regulating what Muslims may eat and how they may obtain it, the law places ordinary bodily practices within a larger framework of religious obligation. Lawful slaughter thus becomes a form of bodily and moral discipline, through which the Muslim learns to restrain personal appetite and bring bodily action into conformity with divine command.

4. Ma Zhu: compassion and the moral limits of ritual slaughter

Ma Zhu's target audience differed from that of Liu Zhi. *Qingzhen Zhinan (A Guide to the Pure and True)* was written primarily for the Muslim community itself. Ma Zhu sought to circulate the work among his fellow Muslims—particularly young Muslims with limited knowledge of religious scriptures—encouraging them to keep the book close at hand and consult it frequently so as to cultivate a clear understanding and a steadfast character. Awareness of this intended readership is crucial to understanding Ma Zhu's discourse on animal slaughter. Unlike Liu Zhi, who often endeavored to make Islamic customs intelligible to educated Han Chinese readers, Ma Zhu focused chiefly on guiding Muslims in the practice of their faith.

This context also shapes the meaning of the word "compassion" as emphasized by Ma Zhu. His concern about the treatment of animals should not be understood simply as an attempt to prove to non-Muslims that Islam is a humane or non-violent religion, although such an argument may have some external influence in this regard. Ma Zhu's more direct concern lies in how Muslims should conduct themselves when engaging in acts permitted by Islamic law. In other words, the question is less whether slaughter is legal and more how believers should understand and confront this legally permitted act of killing. Compassion, self-restraint, and appropriate conduct together define the moral limits of this legal act [16].

Ma Zhu's use of Chinese ethical language was therefore not only a way of showing non-Muslims that Islamic law could be understood through familiar moral concepts. It also provided a language for educating Muslims themselves, usefully directing them toward appropriate dispositions and forms of conduct. In discussing the difference between human beings and other forms of life, Ma presents a theory of "three grades of nature":

"The highest grade is spiritual nature, the middle grade is perceptive nature, and the lowest grade is living nature [16]".

Ma Zhu distinguishes among different forms of life and different capacities: plants possess a living nature, animals possess a perceptive nature, and human beings possess a spiritual nature. Although this distinction places human beings above animals in a hierarchy, it also gives animals a capacity that plants do not possess: they are capable of perception. Animals are not treated simply as lifeless or insensible objects. While Ma Zhu's distinction does not establish that animals experience pain or understand death in the same way as humans, it does suggest that animals possess their own form of perception and awareness, one that merits our concern. A similar distinction appears in the "*Wang Zhi*" chapter of the Xunzi:

"Water and fire possess '*qi*' but not life. Plants possess life but not awareness. Animals possess awareness but not righteousness. Human beings possess qi, life, and also righteousness" [17].

This passage distinguishes different forms of existence based on "*qi*" (vital energy), life, awareness, and moral capacity. Ma's commentary on the division of "natural nature", "intellectual nature", and "spiritual nature" can be understood within the broader context of Chinese thought—that is, plants, animals, and humans are viewed as having different levels of capacity. However, this similarity does not mean that Ma Zhu directly adopted or adapted Xunzi's theories. These two works offer different explanations for what distinguishes humans from other life forms. Xunzi argues that human superiority lies in "*yi*" (righteousness), that is, the ability to establish norms of etiquette, social relationships, and moral order.

In contrast, Ma Zhu's commentary emphasizes spiritual essence, believing it endows humans with unique religious capabilities and responsibilities. This comparison reveals a structural parallel rather than evidence of direct transmission of thought: although both works place animals in an intermediate position between plants and humans, the moral and religious frameworks through which this hierarchical relationship is explained are quite different.

This comparison shows that classical Chinese thought provided a way to rank forms of life according to their capacities, but it does not prove that Ma Zhu directly borrowed or adapted the Xunzi. His hierarchy ultimately belongs to an Islamic understanding of human nature and the created universe. More importantly, hierarchy does not make animals morally insignificant. Because animals can perceive and feel, their treatment remains subject to moral constraints.

Ma Zhu writes:

"Although their forms and voices are different, their feelings are worthy of compassion. How, then, can people make a habit of killing and behave with cruelty without restraint" [16]?

This passage is central to Ma Zhu's understanding of the moral limits of slaughter. His wording of "their feelings are worthy of compassion" (情属可矜) acknowledges that although animals differ from humans in body and voice, they still experience a form of feeling that calls for human compassion. Ma therefore does not reject slaughter altogether. Instead, he questions why people should "make a habit of killing" (嗜杀为常) or act with "cruelty without restraint" (残忍无忌).

The phrase "making a habit of killing" points not simply to the number of animals killed, but to the transformation of killing into a habitual and unrestrained practice. Thus, Ma Zhu is concerned not only with the act of slaughter itself, but also with the character of the perpetrator, which can be revealed by habitual and careless killing. In his view, even legal slaughter has ethical boundaries: Legal permission does not mean that the killing of animals can be unrestrained, reckless, or merciless.

This distinction is crucial to understanding the nuanced relationship between law and ethics in Ma Zhu's discourse. Islamic law may permit the consumption of certain animals under specific conditions, but this does not mean that every act of slaughter has equal moral value. Legal rules address the question of when it is

permissible, while Ma Zhu's emphasis on mercy and restraint focuses on how people should act when exercising this right. Notably, this distinction is my own analytical interpretation of Ma Zhu's discourse and not a legal division explicitly proposed by him.

Nevertheless, his discourse does show that once slaughter is declared legal, the moral issues do not end there. Believers still need to examine the specific methods and attitudes toward the legal act. In this sense, Ma sets moral limits for legal slaughter, asserting that although killing is technically allowed, it does not exempt one from the requirements of mercy, restraint, and responsibility.

Mengzi states:

"Having seen it alive, one cannot bear to see it die. Having heard its cries, one cannot bear to eat its flesh. Therefore, the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen" [18].

This paragraph provides a useful point of comparison, illustrating how encountering a living animal and hearing its cries can awaken compassion in a person and an unwillingness to see it suffer. Ma Zhu similarly recognizes that animals' feelings are "worthy of compassion", but he goes further by turning this recognition into a direct ethical demand on Muslims. Unlike the Mengzi, he does not use compassion to justify withdrawing from the kitchen. Instead, he argues that even when slaughter is lawful, Muslims must exercise restraint and avoid allowing killing to become habitual or morally damaging.

Ma Zhu's warning against becoming accustomed to killing also gives a different meaning to the idea of human superiority. In his view, human beings are not better than animals simply because they are stronger or are purported to occupy a higher position in the order of creation. This superior status also comes with greater moral responsibility. If a person with a spiritual nature becomes inured to killing and acts without restraint, that person fails to live up to the responsibilities of being human. Human superiority, therefore, does not simply grant people greater power over animals. It also requires them to use that power carefully. People should control their desires, treat living creatures with compassion, and avoid causing unnecessary harm.

Traditional Chinese ethical thought provides a useful context for understanding this idea. Classical texts such as the *Book of Rites* [11, 12, 15], *Mengzi* [18], and *Xunzi* [17] articulated principles of moderation in the human use of living creatures. While these traditions did not regard humans and animals as equals, they provided a familiar ethical framework through which Ma's criticism of habitual and unrestrained killing could be understood by Chinese readers.

5. Conclusion

Reading Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi, and Ma Zhu together shows why ritual slaughter is an important site for understanding Islamic thought in late imperial China. These three authors do not offer a single, unified theory of animals or slaughter. Rather, they address different dimensions of the same religious practice: how slaughter should be understood, what makes it legitimate, and what moral limits should govern it. Wang Daiyu connects the physical act of slaughter with purification and the discipline of the self; Liu Zhi grounds its legitimacy in divine command, proper ritual procedure, and the invocation of God's name; and Ma Zhu emphasizes animal sentience, compassion, and restraint. Overall, their arguments suggest that the ethical significance of ritual slaughter extends beyond mere compliance with religious law. It also touches on issues of self-cultivation, such as moral conduct and self-discipline. This connection between religious obligations and moral self-cultivation is particularly evident in the ethical requirements placed on those who perform the ritual slaughter. Believers must not only understand the significance of the ritual and follow the prescribed procedures, but they must also submit their personal judgment to the authority of Allah, restrain their desires, and exercise moral restraint in their treatment of other living beings. Therefore, ritual slaughter reveals an

ideal Qingzhen moral subject: its ethical formation involves not only distinguishing between lawful and unlawful acts but also cultivating a sense of moral responsibility when performing acts permitted by religion. In other words, the fact that religion permits humans to slaughter animals does not mean that people can exercise this right without restriction. On the contrary, these scholars' arguments indicate that even when a certain act is permitted by religious law, believers must still exercise restraint and assume corresponding ethical responsibilities—which is also an important component of self-cultivation. This understanding also complicates the meaning of "*yiru shiyi*" (以儒释伊). In the context of ritual slaughter, "*yiru shiyi*" was more than a process of translating Islamic concepts into Chinese vocabulary. Chinese intellectual resources provided Hui Muslim scholars with a language that made Islamic practices comprehensible within the intellectual world of late imperial China; simultaneously, their discourse still located religious authority in Islamic revelation, divine commandments, and Islamic law. Their writings therefore suggest that "*yiru shiyi*" was not simply a process of conceptual translation, but also a means of explaining how religious knowledge should guide moral conduct. This ethical language also served different audiences. While it helped Chinese readers who are unfamiliar with Islam to understand Islamic religious practices, it can also serve as a means of communicating moral standards and religious obligations within the Muslim community. This perspective also prompts us to examine more closely the relationship between religious knowledge and everyday practices in the Han Kitab. Religious practices such as dietary regulations, fasting, purification rituals, and ritual slaughter provide concrete contexts for connecting religious principles to bodily actions and moral self-discipline. Ritual slaughter deserves particular attention, as it involves religious law, ritual obligations, and ethical considerations surrounding the taking of an animal's life. By examining these connections, we can gain a deeper understanding of how Han Kitab scholars interpret self-cultivation: self-cultivation is manifested not only in philosophical reflection and spiritual pursuits but also in the norms and constraints of daily religious practices. Ultimately, by examining the discussions on ritual slaughter in the works of Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi, and Ma Zhu, this paper offers a perspective on moral self-cultivation that transcends philosophical reflection and spiritual cultivation. These scholars' arguments demonstrate that self-cultivation involves not only the restraint of forbidden desires and behaviors but also the ethical responsibilities one must assume when performing acts permitted by religion. Although Islamic law permits the slaughter of animals under specific conditions, this permission does not mean that believers may disregard self-restraint, compassion, and obedience to Allah's authority. Therefore, ritual animal sacrifice provides a particularly illuminating example for understanding how scholars of the Han Kitab connect religious law to ethical formation. This also demonstrates that the cultivation of moral character can be explained not only through adherence to religious prohibitions but also through the responsible exercise of actions permitted by religious law in everyday religious life.

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