

## **Mirrors of Civilisation: Some Thoughts on Han Mengyun's "The Pavilion of Three Mirrors"**

Written by Cai Zhenyu  
Translated by Shun

First exhibited at the Diriyah Biennale in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in late 2021, artist Han Mengyun's work *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* reflects a unique feature of this exhibition — the conversation between China and the Islamic world. This new body of work is inspired by the famous story of the "Competition Between Two Painters" as told in *Khamsa* by the 12th-century Persian poet Nizāmī Ganjavi.

The story goes that Alexander the Great, upon hearing that both the Romans and the Chinese were famous for their painting, wanted to see who was the best in the world. To this end he summoned both a Roman and a Chinese painter, instructing them to paint on opposite walls of his palace so that he might see their skill for himself. Before they started, Alexander set a curtain in the middle of the room so that the two painters would be hidden from each other while working. When the competition began, the Roman painter immediately displayed his aptitude, creating a work of incredible realism, vividness, and deceptively lifelike quality. As the contest neared its end, however, it became clear that the Chinese painter had still not painted a single brush stroke on the wall; his failure seemed inevitable. Alexander announced the end of the competition and lowered the curtain separating the two. The Chinese painter's wall immediately began to reflect the image opposite its own — instead of doing nothing, the Chinese painter had polished the entire wall into a mirror within which anything in the world could be reflected. Alexander the Great declared that the Chinese painter was superior in artistry, because his work did not seek to imitate reality, rather it directly reflected it.

Han Mengyun's *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* aims to render an abstract and poetic representation of this ancient story. In the centre of the exhibition space is an installation composed of three metal sheets polished on both sides to a reflective finish and made in the shape of an Islamic arch. The installation not only refers to the mirror that is polished by the Chinese painter in Nizāmī's story but also the vault structure of Islamic architecture. The pavilion thus becomes a field of cultural memory: the viewer walks through, and the scene reflected would change accordingly. The artist uses the landscaping techniques of traditional Chinese gardens to build the aesthetic sense of dynamic scenery, shaped by the subjective moving path. Also reflected in the mirror is the large painting on the wall surrounding the pavilion. By integrating and interweaving different regional contexts and cultures, especially the literary imagery and painting language of the Persian and Islamic literary traditions, the artist constructs a cross-cultural and universal symbolic system. Like a Persian manuscript, the artist's interpretation of history and myth, reality and representation, imagination and expression gradually unfold chapter after chapter, image by image.

The story of "Competition Between Two Painters" initially appealed to Han Mengyun for its incorporation of diverse cultural elements: it features Greeks, Romans and Chinese, while being written by a poet from the Islamic world. Nizāmī was one of the most important Persian poets of the 12th century, living out much of his life under the Seljuk dynasty. Like many Islamic scholars of his time, Nizāmī was well-versed in Islamic knowledge and also dabbled in philosophy, natural sciences, and cultural histories. Nizāmī likely came across the story of the "Competition Between Two Painters" while reading the works of al-Ghazālī. By tracing this historical thread, some clues can be established: the origin of this story may be derived from the "painting competition" recorded in the Indian Buddhist sutra *Bhaiṣajyavastu*, in which two monks compete in painting skills in front of the king; in the same way, one monk paints and another polishes the wall. [1] Whatever the historical origins, it was al-Ghazālī who eventually provided the story with its true significance in Islamic intellectual history.

Al-Ghazālī was a Persian-born theologian and philosopher active between the 11th to 12th centuries. He was often viewed as a strict adherent to religious doctrine, being generally hostile to philosophy. The truth, however, is quite different. Before al-Ghazālī, Islamic philosophy was based on the full absorption of ancient Greek philosophy and science, from the translation movement to al-Fārābī, from Spain to Baghdad, to the birth of Ibn Sīnā. Scholars of that era used an Arabized Greek word, *Falsafa*, to name the hitherto Hellenistic academic tradition that had been formative in the Islamic world. [2] Being aware of the

tension between philosophy and traditional Islamic ideology, al-Ghazālī was committed to criticising philosophy *with* philosophy; the nature of his criticism should be understood in the context of "defining the limits of its proper use". In fact, the lifelong ambition of al-Ghazālī could be defined as the introduction of Avicenna's philosophy into the study of Islamic "classics", seeking to integrate the former philosophy into the tradition of speculative dogmatics. Since then, the entire Islamic tradition has been radically reshaped, being inextricably interwoven with the study of philosophy.

In al-Ghazālī's view, the competition between the Roman and Chinese painters could actually suggest a different meaning: The Romans represented a Hellenic philosophical tradition originating from Greece, while the Chinese represented a Sufi tradition originating from the eastern Islamic world. The essence of the competition of the painters is therefore the competition of two philosophical approaches, whose emphasis can be understood as two different epistemologies. Hellenic philosophers were convinced that the essence of cognition is to imitate the world by obtaining the "images" or "forms" (*ṣūra*) of the mind and to know is to accumulate the forms of the mind properly. Sufīs, on the other hand, emphasise the essence of cognition as a process of "unveiling" (*mukāshafa*): it is precisely by revealing the truth concealed by these mind-generated forms that true knowledge becomes possible. What motivated al-Ghazālī to tell this story is his desire to champion the approach of Sufism whilst still affirming the Hellenic tradition. Although the philosopher's skills are extraordinary, ultimately, the unveiling of the mind is a more essential way of knowing than accumulating presentations and forms.[3]

Why is the unveiling of the mind more worthy of affirmation? The most influential answer to this question comes from Ibn ʿArabī, the true founder of theoretical Sufism. ʿArabī advocates a radical metaphysical monism, which considers the Absolute (*ḥaqq*) as the one-and-only Origin and everything other as the manifestation (*tajallī*). He claims that the Absolute manifests itself as all forms, while all forms remain one with the entity of the Absolute, just like a beam of light reflecting thousands of colours. Based on this kind of monism or non-dualism, ʿArabī further makes a distinction between the two modes of cognition. The first mode is directed by the cognition of physical forms; knowledge of things based on categorisation per their nature. However, when indulging in this process of knowing, people would forget the most fundamental truth — that "all things are one". In order to achieve this kind of cognition, it is necessary to eliminate the concealment of physical forms over the *noumenon* through a negative cognitive approach, that is, the second mode. When this concealment is removed, the subject of cognition would enter into an awakened awareness of the true knowledge of oneness.

The story of "Competition Between Two Painters" is essentially a discussion on the disparity of philosophies. What fascinates Han Mengyun is precisely the Sufi philosophy, identified or disguised as "Chinese". For the very first time, Islam and China and even the East seem to be almost aligned, as if they are confronting the same questions. It is neither the imagined China nor the historical coincidence that intrigued Han. Rather, it is exactly the coincidental alignment between imagination and historical truth that forged this obsession. From the artist, who has long been immersed in Chinese traditional art and letters, a vague idea emerged: the skill owned by the Chinese painter described by al-Ghazālī seems to embody some kind of spirituality rooted in Chinese traditional thoughts, a characteristic perhaps overlooked by al-Ghazālī.

Han Mengyun is however not the only one drawn by this incidental commonality. In recent years, many scholars have noticed the similarities between the monistic tradition of Islamic philosophy and Chinese philosophy. The most influential study on this matter is the renowned *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* by Japanese scholar Toshihiko Izutsu. Izutsu was deeply drawn to the unfinished work of Henry Corbin, the most important French Islamic scholar of the 20th century. He aspired to continue the meta-historical, comparative philosophy study begun by Corbin, in order to promote a truly mutual understanding between different cultural traditions. His given reason was that "...at no time in the history of humanity has the need for mutual understanding among the nations of the world been more keenly felt than in our days." [4] To achieve this cause, in Izutsu's view, we need to take a deep look into the core philosophical systems of the world's cultures and compare them to find the source of commonality known as "the perennial philosophy". It is through the discovery of this perennial philosophy that a greater understanding between cultures can be reached. In *Sufism and Taoism*, Izutsu first made independent studies of both the theoretical Sufism established by Ibn ʿArabī and the Taoist philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, later comparing the two. In his opinion, both Sufism and Taoism advocate a similar monism, except that the latter has a different name and form system: Taoism calls "the Absolute" the Tao; it advocates that all things begin with Tao and they are also unified with the entity of it. Based on this monism, both Sufism and Taoism have developed a negative epistemology, emphasising the removal of the concealment brought by the empirical self, physical forms, and disputes of the mind, to achieve a more fundamental "clarity" to enlighten the existence of all things.

Carrying forward Toshihiko Izutsu's aspiration, Han Mengyun intends that the mirror in *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* will reflect both her personal perspective and a universal perspective at the same time: this mirror is not only a personal insight into Islam as perceived by the artist herself, but also a representation of Islam as seen by Chinese artists. In the mirror, the artist tries to integrate individuality with the *Geist* of Chinese and Islamic traditions. This attempt also reflects the artist's further ambition: from this mirror, we can respond to an issue of Orientalism that has plagued all those who have advocated dialogues between civilisations for so long. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said paid particular attention to the orientalist paintings of Middle Eastern people and their lives during the 19th century. Brilliant as they were in terms of the technical and artistic skill they demonstrated, in essence what they presented was nothing but the way Islam was viewed through the reductive lens of the colonists. These orientalist paintings are simultaneously so real, and yet so distorted.[5] Han's mirror is different. It does not presuppose its own prejudices to reflect the other; it would only strive to subside its own prejudice so that the other's true self manifests. Those whose intellectual traditions are embedded in the history of the "mirror" can perhaps understand each other in their sharing of the perennial philosophy.

However, it is precisely in the aspiration that Izutsu pursues, and in the promise of the perennial philosophy, that the danger lies of undermining the dialogue between civilisations: if mutual understanding among civilisations would lead them to find the essential sense of identity between each other, does this mean that there are no truly "other" civilisations? Amongst all the lessons of the 20th century, has nothing been learnt from the countless disasters caused by this obsession with identity? On the other hand, if we are convinced that civilisations do in fact have different essences, how can we not fall into inescapable rivalries as we see in the "Competition Between Two Painters", or even into what Samuel Huntington called the "clash of civilisations"? Furthermore, whether it is the identity pursued by the perennial philosophy or the heterogeneity presupposed by the theory of civilisational clash, they all seem to point to an essentialist understanding of civilisation itself. The former believes that all civilisations share a common essence, while the latter argues that different civilisations have their own different natures. This is the argument that worries Said the most: isn't civilisation just a mosaic of chance combinations of elements with no clear essence at all? Rather than static and unchanging, the idea and definition of any civilisation is constantly enriching and renewing itself. But if we consider civilisation as an unceasingly flowing stream, does the fixation of civilisations on an established perennial philosophy run the risk of slowing the flowing stream into a lifeless and stagnant one?[6]

All these questions bring us further towards the dilemma that cannot be ignored in *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors*. However fascinating the ideal of China in the "Competition Between Two Painters" may be, it is fundamentally still a story about competition. Just as the Chinese painter needs the comparison with the Roman painter in order to be himself, the "Eastern Philosophy" (Sufism-Taoism) to which Toshihiko Izutsu devoted himself must also come into its own in a confrontation with Western philosophy. Does a civilisation maintaining a perennial philosophy also only come to know itself when reflected by a civilisation that rejects perennial philosophy? Indeed, Izutsu's perennial philosophy is certainly applicable to people who perceive and exercise the mind like a mirror, but how would it make sense to people who do not perceive the mirror as such? The tragedy of trying to reach mutual understanding by exploring a shared identity is that such understanding is but circling around itself in vain. To acknowledge the true other is to acknowledge the risk of "competition".

*The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* does not withhold its competitive nature. This is an artwork about competition, and an artwork *participating* in competition. This provides us with another perspective from which we may interpret the work: perhaps what really matters is not the essential identity of some well-intentioned misunderstanding that the mirror in the story points to. Rather, it is the meeting of heterogeneity—Islam, Buddhism and Taoism—through the mirror. For both Izutsu and Han Mengyun, the image of the mirror not only unfolds the oriental philosophies in the Islamic tradition but also brings them back to the Buddhist and Taoist traditions in which they have long been immersed. For the audience coming from a Muslim background, the perspective may be reversed. What is most important here is the question of what mediates conflicts of heterogeneity: it may not be the sharing of perspective on the same issue but rather the ethical responsibility that one is asked to fulfill when seeing and understanding the other at the encounter of disparate cultural perspectives. Perhaps it is exactly this ethical responsibility that makes dialogue possible. Said is right about this: it is not civilisation but ignorance that creates conflicts. More often than not, those who seek conflict are so alike, while those who seek harmony and coexistence are so different.

No matter how we try to explore the cross-civilisational dialogue in *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors*, it is impossible to reach any form of conclusion. Just like all inspiring artworks, *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* proposes no solutions to its concerns, yet unfolds all its myriad implications for us to digest: Islam, East and West, Buddhism, identity, heterogeneity, the Roman painter, Orientalism, and so forth. This is what makes the work excel — its reflection of the wholeness and complexity of the world. *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* is optimistic; it transports us back to that golden age of Islam. It was a time when a Roman painter and

his fellow Greek philosophers could engage in meaningful dialogue with their Islamic counterparts without concern. In the story, Alexander the Great, a young man searching for the furthest horizons of the world, declares the "brilliance" of the two painters with mutual respect. Millennia later in the 21st century, perhaps the best-known modern version of the "Competition Between Two Painters" strikes a different tone. Please allow me to borrow the story from *My Name is Red* by Orhan Pamuk as the finale of my review.

In the story, the Ottoman Sultan asked the best miniaturists of his empire to paint him a portrait in the style of the Frankish painters. However, his plan is thwarted by the murder of one of the miniaturists. Kara (Black), the main character of this story, is then appointed to look into the case. After extensive investigation, he found that the murderer was Olive, the other miniaturist involved in this work. Olive confessed his motive for the murder to Black. In order to fulfill the wishes of the Sultan, he studied hard and became fascinated by the Frankish painter's skill. After countless hours of practice, he came to the disheartening realisation; that the representation of physical reality through the Frankish artist's brushwork was so lifelike that miniatures would never be able to reach such a level of realism. Even more shocking to him was the fact that, as a miniaturist, even if he spent the rest of his life trying to imitate the Frankish painting style, he would never be able to measure up to their brilliance. The secret is that imitating the Frankish painting style was intended to provide the miniatures with a personal touch, however, it was precisely because of the imitation of the Frankish technique that the miniaturists found it impossible to find a personal style. This drove Olive into despair, and deciding that it would be best to prevent the introduction of Frankish painting techniques, he committed a murder. Olive was eventually brought to justice by Black, but the inescapable fate of the miniature that he revealed caused a decisive impact on Black's mind.

In the end, Black fulfilled his lifelong wish — he finally reunited with Shekure, a woman he had been in love with. Thence forth they lived a peaceful life, indulging themselves in the collection and appreciation of miniatures, sharing their pursuits with like-minded people; leaving no song unsung and no wine untasted. But Shekure felt that her husband was never really happy again. For the rest of his life, he was trapped in a sort of incurable melancholy, as if something was missing from his soul forever.[7] The reversed "Competition Between Two Painters" is a story of sorrow. This is perhaps a sorrow that the people convinced of mosaicism would never overcome, a sorrow that the people committed to perennial philosophy could never escape from, a sorrow that has been constantly distorted by the conflict theorists, and a sorrow that *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* strives to tackle.

#### Notes:

[1] CHEN M., "An Analysis of the Text and Image Origin of the Persian Story: *Mani painting a Dead Dog*", *Studies in World Religions*, 2017(4): 52.

[2] Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā were two of the most important philosophers of the Islamic school of Aristotelianism - the so called 'al-hukama'. In the Islamic philosophical tradition, al-Fārābī, known as the "second master" (Aristotle being the first), was active in the 9th-10th centuries. He put forward the theory of "one truth in two expressions" in the field of political philosophy (religion and philosophy are just different ways of expressing the same truth; the former being the poetic expression of truth, with the latter the rational expression of truth). Ibn Sīnā, active in the 10th-11th centuries, is generally considered to be the greatest philosopher of the Islamic philosophical tradition. With this dividing line, Islamic philosophy can be divided into pre-Ibn Sīnā and post-Ibn Sīnā periods. The pre-Ibn Sīnā period was primarily concerned with the interpretation of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. After Ibn Sīnā, instead of immersing themselves in studying and commentating on Aristotle, philosophers began a new tradition of commentating on Ibn Sīnā's work. By challenging, defending and renewing Ibn Sīnā's philosophical system, philosophers developed various influential philosophical schools, enriching and diverting the concerns of Islamic philosophy. Furthermore, as Ibn Sīnā's philosophical works entered into the world of Latin scholarship, spurred by translation movements from the 12th century onwards, the influence of his work in metaphysics and philosophy of the mind began to extend beyond the Islamic tradition, which laid the fundamental philosophical framework for future developments in western scholastic philosophy.

[3] For a detailed interpretation of al-Ghazālī's theory of the story of two painters, see:

TREIGER A. *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazali's Theory of Mystical Cognition and Its Avicennian Foundation*[M]. London: Routledge, 2012: 66-68.

[4] IZUTSU T., *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983: 469.

[5] SAID E., *Orientalism*[M]. London: Penguin Books, 1991: 118.

[6] For the discussion on the mosaic nature of civilization, see:

SAID E., “The Clash of Ignorance”. In *Geopolitics*[M]. London: Routledge, 2014: 191-194.

[7] Pamuk, O., 2010. *My name is Red*, trans. SHEN Zhixing, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006.