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# **The Sacred Edict in Arabic Translation: Saʿid Muḥammad al-ʿAsali's «*Qanun al-Ṣin*» (1906)**

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**Abstract.** This article discusses a little known work by the Syrian Islamic scholar Saʿid Muḥammad al-ʿAsali al-Ṭarablusi, better known in Central Asia as Shami Damulla (1880-1932?). Entitled *Qanun al-Ṣin* (*The Law of China*), the work was published in Cairo in 1906, at the conclusion of al-ʿAsali's first visit to Xinjiang. As I describe, the work is an Arabic translation of the so-called *Li Kitabī*, a bilingual Chinese-Turkic redaction of the Kangxi emperor's Sacred Edict, with supplementary material shedding further light on the functioning of late-Qing administration in Xinjiang. I conclude the article with some reflections on the place of the *Qanun al-Ṣin* in Islamic modernist discourse on China in the early twentieth century.

**Keywords:** Xinjiang; Saʿid Muḥammad al-ʿAsali al-Ṭarablusi; Qing law; translation; Confucianism; Islamic modernism.

Saʿid Muḥammad al-ʿAsali al-Ṭarablusi (1880-1932?), better known by the name Shami Damulla «The Syrian Master» is by now a relatively familiar figure in the historiography of Islam in Central Asia. An Ottoman Arab by birth, al-ʿAsali left his mark as an influential hadith scholar in Soviet Turkistan in the 1920s, before falling victim to the Soviet anti-religious campaign and the persecutions of the 1930s. As discussed in studies by Ashirbek Muminov (2005) and Bakhtiyar Babajanov (2015), from 1919 onwards al-ʿAsali cultivated a circle of students in Tashkent who went on to play an important role in Soviet Islam in the period following World War II.

Most discussions of al-ʿAsali's life and times make mention of the fact that prior to his arrival in Soviet Turkistan, he had spent a considerable amount of time in neighboring Xinjiang. Between 1900 and 1919, a period spanning the fall of the Qing and the creation of the Chinese Republic, al-ʿAsali made three separate visits to Xinjiang, and acquired a considerable profile in learned circles throughout the province. In my recent book I touched on his involvement in school reform in Kashgar, and his efforts to insert himself into the relationship between the Muslims of Xinjiang and the Ottoman court (Brophy 2016). In this brief article I introduce one of the literary products of al-ʿAsali's years in Xinjiang, a study of Qing law entitled *Qanun al-Ṣin* (*The Law of China*).

**The *Li Kitabī* in Late-Qing Xinjiang.** Published in Cairo in 1906, al-ʿAsali's *Qanun al-Ṣin* serves as a rare example of a modernist Muslim theologian's engagement with the Confucian tradition. Besides this, the work is also valuable for the biography of al-ʿAsali that it contains, penned by the Palestinian writer Ibrahim al-Dabbagh. Al-Dabbagh's preface is, to my knowledge, the best available source for the early life of the man who eventually became known as Shami Damulla, describing his intellectual formation in the madrasas of India in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and attesting to al-ʿAsali's growing reputation as a man of letters.

The *Qanun al-Ṣin* is presented as a translation of a handbook of Qing law. According to al-ʿAsali's own introduction, he received a copy of the book from an educated young man in Kashgar, a local Muslim who had received a Chinese education and had been appointed to teach in a Qing school (*xuetang* 學堂). Al-ʿAsali carried the volume with him on his travels through the province, which eventually took him to the provincial capital Dihua, a town he refers to by its colloquial designation of Hongmiaozi 紅廟子 (i.e. the Red Temple, a local landmark).

Al-‘Asali had made his way to Dihua to present some kind of petition (about what he does not say), and doing so brought him to the translation office of the provincial governor’s yamen. There he engaged one of the translators in conversation about the book that he was carrying:

One of the translators met me at that time, and I showed him the book and asked him what it was about. When he saw it he stood up and said to me: «Where did you get that from?»

I said: «One of my friends gave me this».

He said: «And do you know what it is?»

I said: «No».

He said «This is the *Li*».

I said «And what is *Li*?»

He said «This contains information about the laws of the Chinese government». Then he opened it and started flipping through it until he found a sentence, and said to me: «See, this sentence is relevant to your petition. The chief secretary has included this with the translation of your petition, so that it will gain the governor’s approval».

Then he started to laud and praise its composer, Tongzhi Huangdi, the emperor of China. He said that the people of China were in unanimous agreement that this emperor was without equal, that in his wisdom, kindness, good policy and care for the people he attained the level of a saint (*shengren* 聖人). The book was composed four years before his death.

I asked: «Would there be anything to prevent me from translating it into my language?»

He said «No» (Tunji Khangdi 1906, P. 1-2).

Impressed by this fulsome praise of the Tongzhi emperor (reigned 1861–1875), al-‘Asali set about translating the work into Arabic, relying for this purpose on an assistant who was bilingual in Turkic and Chinese.

The book which al-‘Asali was translating has become known to the scholarly world as the *Li Kitabi* (*The Book of Li*), a title presumably referring to Chinese *li* 禮, i.e. ritual propriety. This bilingual Chinese-Turkic text was itself a product of a complicated process of translation. Printed in the wake of Zuo Zongtang’s reconquest of Xinjiang in the 1870s, the purpose of the *Li Kitabi* was to inculcate Confucian ethical standards and knowledge of Qing law among Xinjiang’s Muslims, an approach that reflected the territory’s new status as a full-blown province of the Qing Empire. The Chinese text of the *Li Kitabi* consisted of the *Sixteen Sacred Maxims with Simple Explanations of the Code* (*Shengyu shiliutiao fu lü yijie* 聖諭十六條附律易解), by Xia Xin 夏忻 (1789–1871). This is an 1868 redaction of the Kangxi emperor’s Sacred Edict, various editions of which were recited publicly throughout the empire every fortnight (Mair 1985). As well as homilies on the Sacred Edict’s original sixteen maxims, Xia Xin’s work also contains a selection of articles from the Qing code (*Daqing lüli* 大清律例) (Yang 2007). Alongside this Chinese text, the *Li Kitabi* provides a loose Turkic paraphrase of its text’s injunctions and sanctions, which at times diverges sharply from Xia Xin’s composition. Either the translators came up with this Turkic text themselves, or were working from a highly simplified Chinese or Manchu version of the Sacred Edict.

The Turkic text of the *Li Kitabi* attracted the interest of a number of scholars passing through Xinjiang in the early twentieth century, and three of al-‘Asali’s contemporaries published studies of it. In 1891, the Tarbaghatay imam Qurban ‘Ali Khalidi showed the visiting linguist Nikolai Katanov a copy of the *Li Kitabi* that he

had acquired in Dihua in 1886. Katanov copied it out, and eventually obtained his own copy, producing a transcription and translation of the text in 1902 (Katanov 1902). Where exactly Katanov derived the title *Li Kitabı* from is unclear, but judging from al-ʿAsali's encounter with the translators in Dihua (see above), the text was indeed known by this designation in Xinjiang<sup>1</sup>.

The second visitor to Xinjiang to study the *Li Kitabı* was the Prussian archaeologist Albert von Le Coq, who was given a copy as a gift of the hereditary Muslim aristocrat (*wang*) of Lükchün, in the Turfan oasis. In the spring of 1905, Le Coq read through the text with the help of a local translator, and transcribed it according to his assistant's colloquial pronunciation. Back in Europe he continued working on the text, aided by the Sinologist Erich Haenisch, and eventually published his study in 1925 (Le Coq 1925).

Finally, around the same time as Le Coq was excavating in the Turfan oasis, the Kokandi poet Žakirjan Furqat came into possession of a copy of the *Li Kitabı* in Yarkand, where he was then residing. Furqat rendered the *Li Kitabı*'s awkward translationese style into a more literary form of Chaghatay, before sending it to the *Turkistan Provincial News* (*Türkistan vilayatinin gazetisi*), the organ of the tsarist administration in Tashkent. From December 1905 to February 1906, the *Turkistan Provincial News* printed a serialized edition of the text entitled «The Laws of China and its Political Affairs» (*Qavaʿid-i Chin va amurat-i siyasi*) (Furqat 1991, vol. 2, P. 262–280).

These studies indicate that the *Li Kitabı* had a relatively wide circulation in late-Qing Xinjiang, but the work is extremely rare today. No Chinese publications or library catalogues that I have seen make mention of it. Unfortunately, a copy once recorded as part of Martin Hartmann's collection of Central Asian prints and lithographs seems to have gone missing (Hartmann 1904, P. 100–101). The Katanov text, shipped to Istanbul with the sale of the linguist's library in 1914, is the most likely prospect for researchers, though so far my efforts to confirm its existence have not borne fruit. In the 1930s Hüseyin Namik Orkun drew on the volume from Katanov's library for a Turkish translation of the *Li Kitabı* (Orkun 1935), and in 1941 Wolfram Eberhard also examined the work, penning some valuable notes on it (Eberhard 1978, P. 123–127).

**The *Qanun al-Şin*.** For Katanov and Le Coq, the *Li Kitabı* was primarily an exercise in Turkology. Unlike these two scholars (though similar to Furqat), al-ʿAsali saw his work instead as a contribution to the Islamic world's knowledge of Qing China and its laws. The work was published at a prestigious press in Cairo, and was a means of establishing the translator's reputation in the Ottoman literary milieu. Al-ʿAsali's name on the cover is accompanied by the epithets «the renowned traveller and great hadith scholar and linguist» (*al-raḥḥālat al-shahīr al-muḥaddith al-lughawī al-kabīr*), and luminaries of the Arab intellectual scene such as Rashid Riḍa and Muḥammad Kurd ʿAli gave his book positive reviews in their journals (Riḍa 1907; Kurd 1907). Conscious of the need to meet certain literary standards, al-ʿAsali penned an introduction and conclusion to his translation, and also edited the text significantly. Dividing the text into two halves, he dealt with the Sacred Edict's homilies in the first, and the punishments for various infractions in the second.

Although al-ʿAsali's *Qanun al-Şin* is obviously a translation of the *Li Kitabı*, it is equally evident that his text is much more substantial work than the Turkic version.

<sup>1</sup> Katanov adds that in his view the word *li* in Arabic script represents Chinese *liyi*, by which he probably intends 禮義 «propriety and righteousness». He also received information to the effect that the book was the work of a translator named Fušan in Kashgar, though this seems to confuse the *Li Kitabı* with the Turkic translation of the *Yuzhi quanshan yaoyan* 御製勸善要言, printed in Kashgar in 1893.

Given its length, my initial hypothesis was that he was working from the Chinese text of Xia Xin's *Sixteen Sacred Maxims*, but a comparison of the two quickly ruled this out. Al-'Asali's work draws exclusively on the Turkic text, but augments it considerably with supplementary materials. Without going into a full exegesis of the text, I will demonstrate this structure using al-'Asali's fifth clause on ploughing and weaving, which corresponds to the fourth maxim of the Sacred Edict: «Recognize the importance of husbandry and the culture of the mulberry tree, in order to ensure a sufficiency of clothing and food» (Mair 1985, P. 325). In the *Li Kitabı*, this section begins as follows:

*yemäsä ğazā ač qaladur, kiymäsä čafan tonlap qaladur. ādam ač qalmay desä tarilğu qilsun. ādam savuqğa tonlamay desä, fila baqsun. tarilğu qilmaq er kişiniñ işi. fila baqmaq mazlūm kişiniñ işi* (Katanov 1902, P. 38–39).

If someone does not eat, they will go hungry. If they don't wear a coat, they will freeze. If someone wishes to be free from starvation, they should plant crops. If they wish to avoid freezing in the cold, they should cultivate silkworms. Agriculture is a man's work, while raising silkworms is a woman's work.

Al-'Asali's Arabic follows the *Li Kitabı* up to this point, but then turns to a much more elaborate injunction on the same theme, which has the feel of an official decree:

And cultivate, oh people, and sow, and construct irrigation and dig reservoirs and canals, and bring to life what is dead, and plant trees with wholesome and delicious fruit, and increase as far as you can your planting of mulberry trees and poplars etc., and willows and other kinds of tree for firewood and construction supplies, and similarly increase your vegetables and herbs. You must also obtain hemp, flax, cotton, sugarcane and bamboo, and be sure not to neglect the benefits of tea.

The text then switches to an explication of concrete regulations for agriculture and sericulture, beginning with the following:

He who wishes to reclaim wasteland or cultivate his land but does not have seeds or the instruments of cultivation, then let him request what he needs in terms of silkworms, livestock, or equipment from the agricultural official (*amīr al-arāḍi*) in that county. It is that official's duty to give him a respite of three years in which he will not levy any land tax (*kharāj*) from him, and then he will continue to request what is owing without increasing the amount. And thus, those who devote themselves to reclaiming the wasteland and bring to it sufficient water, thereby making it fit for cultivation and habitation, their recompense will be that a rank will be bestowed upon them as an official of the county. And if they had been dismissed for an offense it will be forgiven, and they will be returned to their position, and if they are an official, then they will rise or be increased in rank during their tenure, and if they are not worthy of that, then the emperor will reward them generously, and make honourable mention of them (Tunji Khangdi 1906, P. 17).

Identifying the source(s) for these sections of al-'Asali's translation, which do not occur in either the Chinese or Turkic text of the *Li Kitabı*, presents something of a conundrum. It may well be that he was working with the text of decrees or proclamations that he encountered on his travels through Xinjiang, or was interpolating text from administrative handbooks such as the *Instructions for Raising Silkworms (Fila Baqadurghan Bayanı)*, a work that I have not been able to examine (Hartmann 194, P. 101). Or, it is possible that he simply incorporated what his interlocutors told him was the prevailing law of the land. Al-'Asali was a conscientious editor, though, and in his introduction he does not mention embellishing the text in any way. A third possibility, therefore, is that there were editions of the *Li Kitabı* circulating in provincial Xinjiang with greater detail on local administration, and al-'Asali was working from one of these.

Whatever his source, these additional texts have the feel of authentic pronouncements of the Qing authorities in Xinjiang. In vocabulary and syntax, the passages show traces of linguistic features characteristic of Turkic translations issuing from the Qing bureaucracy in Xinjiang<sup>2</sup>. This being the case, al-ʿAsali's work acquires a certain additional value as a source on Qing provincial administration in Xinjiang. Among the most interesting of these rulings occurs at the end of the forty-second and final clause of the *Qanun al-Şin*. This section deals with the activities of *qadi* courts, and the relationship of the Qing code to Islamic law:

The people of the realm (*al-iqlīm*) are equal in rights. There is no difference among them, nor between the greatest scholars and the rest. If someone among the Muslims commits a crime, then the punishment will be meted out to him according to the determination of the shariʿa of the Holy Muhammad<sup>3</sup>. Oh Muslims! Respect your religion, and be faithful to what your Prophet has brought you. If someone among you does something reprehensible, then it is up to the *qadi* to enforce the shariʿa against him. Should [the *qadi*] refuse to do so, we have instituted a punishment of the *li* in terms of blows and reprobation. If any *qadi* makes a ruling, or mufti gives an opinion, in contradiction to the shariʿa, they will be stripped of their office, and will be deemed to be falsifying the religion. The people of the realm are obliged to strive cooperatively and unite in everything that concerns the strengthening of the realm, the defense of the kingdom, and the increase of happiness. In this way they will be worthy of the emperor's approval (Tunji Khangdi 1906, P. 58).

If this does indeed represent some kind of official decree, it provides a valuable insight into the public ideological framing of Qing and Islamic law in late-Qing Xinjiang. On the one hand, it equalizes the status of the Muslims of Xinjiang and the inhabitants of the interior—an equality before Qing law that was embodied in the promulgation of the *Li Kitabı* itself. On the other hand, it affirms the role of the shariʿa in adjudicating criminal cases involving Muslims. It does this, though, within an encompassing Qing legal regime that is itself capable of regulating the application of Islamic law. That is to say, the Qing state reserved for itself the right to act as an authority in determining when and where *qadis* and *muftis* had violated the shariʿa.

**Conclusion.** The Sacred Edict has a long and involved textual history, both inside China as a means of moral instruction, and outside China as an entry point for foreigners to fathom the inner workings of the empire—a tradition tracing as far back as Russian translations of the Sacred Edict in the eighteenth century. To this textual history we can now add al-ʿAsali's Arabic rendering of the *Li Kitabı*. In this sense, al-ʿAsali was participating in a global effort to grasp the nature of Qing rule via the Sacred Edict. Yet as the work of an Islamic modernist, a man often referred to as a pan-Islamist and Salafist, al-ʿAsali's *Qanun al-Şin* presents its own distinct problems of interpretation. To properly situate this work in an Islamic intellectual context would require a much lengthier study than this, but I offer a few thoughts here by way of conclusion.

Al-ʿAsali's justification for his translation has a slightly apologetic ring to it. Situating himself within the genre of travel writing, he explains that he was motivated simply by a desire to set down the «weird and wonderful» (*ajāʾib wa gharāʾib*), a common defense for Muslim writers taking an interest in things non-Muslim. He also informs us that he anticipated questions upon returning home about the state of

<sup>2</sup> Below, for example, the word *iqlīm* «clime, region» is the standard translation for Chinese *guo* 國, Manchu *gurun* in the Turkic «translationese» of Xinjiang, an idiom that I have referred to elsewhere as «yamen Uyghur». On p. 18 of the *Qanun al-Şin* we find the phrase «Is this not the case?» (*a-laysa hādā bi-şidq?*), most likely a translation of the Turkic *emāsmu*, the standard rendering of the Manchu suffix *-kai*.

<sup>3</sup> The Arabic text reads MJYN ŠNK RYN, i.e. Majin (?) Shengren 聖人. In a footnote, al-ʿAsali confirms that this refers to the Prophet Muhammad.

affairs in China. In his opinion, the fact that the *Qanun al-Şin* contains the words of the emperor should lend his work greater reliability than the hearsay one usually encounters in travelogues (Tunji Khangdi 1906, P. 3–4). Given the effort involved in translating and publishing this work, though, it is hard to avoid the sense that al-ʿAsali's work in some way represents an endorsement of the positive view of the Qing expressed by the translator in Dihua—a sense that is consistent with what else we know of al-ʿAsali's view of the Qing (Brophy 2016, P. 108). As seen above, the final section of the *Qanun al-Şin* emphasizes the interest of Qing officialdom in upholding the shariʿa, and in his conclusion al-ʿAsali expresses to his readers a hope that “it may seem to you that most of this [code] falls within the rulings of our pure shariʿa” (Tunji Khangdi 1906, P. 58).<sup>4</sup>

The timeless notion of the justice of the Chinese emperor was a trope known to Islamic writing as much as to European. Beyond this, though, there seems to have been renewed interest in things Chinese among Muslim modernists at the turn of the century. Cairene journals such as Jurji Zaydan's *al-Hilal* and Rashid Riḍa's *al-Manar* carried articles not only on the political situation in the Far East, but also on Chinese religion and the Confucian classics. Though often mediated by Christian missionary discourse on China, Muslim intellectuals brought their own concerns to this topic. Riḍa argued, for example, that China's example of harmonious civilization confirmed that society's superiority to the Christian world, and he deemed it permissible for Muslims to think of Chinese religions as as much the product of divine revelation as Judaism and Christianity (Ryad 2009, P. 194–195).

It was not simply the affairs of Muslims in China that interested these intellectuals, therefore, but idea of China as a unique civilizational space, administered in accordance with a canon of classical texts. For Arab dissidents of the Hamidian period such as al-ʿAsali, who sought the salvation of the Islamic lands by renewing the authority of Islam's classical texts, it is not hard to imagine how such a vision of China could be attractive—not least as an ideal to which the Ottoman Empire might equally aspire. If there is validity to this line of interpretation, then we could well read the *Qanun al-Şin* as a rare, possibly even unique meeting of the minds, between kindred intellectual endeavors at opposite ends of Eurasia: Salafist theology with its strict emphasis on the hadith and Quran, and Zuo Zongtang's Hunanese school of activist Confucianism, which viewed the empire-wide consolidation of traditional ethical standards as key to China's survival in the modern world.

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<sup>4</sup> The Syrian publicist Muḥammad Kurd ʿAli took particular interest in the *Qanun al-Şin*'s concluding passage on Islamic law, and excerpted it in his review (Kurd ʿAli 1907, P. 664).

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**Араб аудармадағы киелі эдикт:  
Са'ид Мухаммад аль-Асалиның «Канун аль-Син» атты шығармасы (1906)**

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**Түйін.** Мақалада Орталық Азияда Шами Дамулла (1880-1932?) атымен әйгілі болған сириялық мұсылман ғалымы Са'ид Мухаммад аль-Асали аль-Тараблусинің көпшілікке кең тынылмаған шығармасы қарастырылады. Аль-Асалидың «Канун аль-Син» (Қытайдағы құқық) атты шығармасы оның Шыңжаңға алғашқы сапарынан кейін, яғни 1906 жылы Қайрде жарық көрген. Бұл шығарма Шыңжаңдағы кейінгі Цинь әкімшілігінің жұмыс жүргізу ерекшеліктерін ашып көрсететін мәліметтермен толықтырылған император Кансидың қытай-түркі екітілдік қасиетті эдикты – «Ли китаби»ның араб тіліне аударылған нұсхасы болып есептеледі. Мақала соңында автор XX ғасырдың басындағы Қытай туралы исламдық модернистік пікірлердегі «Канун аль-Син»ның орнына қатысты өзінің жеке көзқарастарымен бөліседі.

**Түйін сөздер:** Шыңжаң; Са'ид Мухаммед аль-Асали аль-Тараблуси; Цинь құқығы; аударма; конфуцишілдік; исламдық модернизм.

**Священный эдикт в арабском переводе:  
сочинение «Канун аль-Син» Са'ида Мухаммада аль-Асали (1906)**

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**Аннотация.** В статье рассмотрено малоизвестное сочинение мусульманского ученого из Сирии - Са'ида Мухаммада аль-Асали аль-Тараблуси, более известного в Центральной Азии под именем *Шами Дамулла* (1880-1932?). Сочинение аль-Асали под названием «Канун аль-Син» (Право в Китае) было опубликовано в Каире в 1906, после первой поездки Шами Дамулла в Синьцзян. Сочинение представляет собой арабский перевод так называемой книги «Ли китаби», китайско-тюркской двуязычной редакции священного эдикта императора Канси, с добавлением материала, проливающего свет на функционирование позднецинской администрации в Синьцзяне. Статья завершается некоторыми собственными взглядами автора на место «Канун аль-Син» в исламском модернистском дискурсе о Китае в начале XX века.

**Ключевые слова:** Синьцзян; Са'ид Мухаммад аль-Асали аль-Тараблуси; цинское право; перевод; конфуцианство; исламский модернизм.