

IBN KHALDŪN AND CONFUCIUS:  
A PRELIMINARY COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS  
BETWEEN *ASABIYYAH* AND *WU LUN*

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*Introduction*

How the Islamic and Chinese philosophical traditions relate to one another is a subject of much study<sup>1</sup>. However, such studies are few and far in between due to the obvious difficulties involved. Comparing two different civilizations often results in and sometimes requires generalizations. The more generalizations made, the more academically risky the comparative analysis becomes. Nevertheless, while some generalizations are found wanting, others are useful and necessary for a clearer understanding. Like any deep comparative analysis across civilizational thought, comparing Islamic Thought and Philosophy or elements thereof with counterparts in the Chinese religio-philosophic tradition is wrought with difficulties and pitfalls. And yet, it is such comparative analyses that are both lacking as much as they are sorely needed in a truly globalized world. The responsible intent of such comparative analysis is not merely to act as bridges across peoples of different worldviews but also contributing to a more peaceful world that understands itself that much better.

This paper is intended to contribute towards such a direction while specifically looking at points of differences and similarities between the ideas of Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406 C.E./732-808 A.H.) and Confucius (551 - 479 B.C.E.). Indeed, there are many questions yet to be explored. Are Ibn Khaldūn's ideas about the rise and fall

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<sup>1</sup> One such study was by Shaykh 'Abd Al-Wahid Yahya better known as René-Guénon (1886 -1951). See Guénon, *Aperçus sur l'ésotérisme islamique et le Taoïsme* (Insights into Islamic Esoterism & Taoism), 1973. The other is Toshihiko Izutsu *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, 1983.

of civilizations and the right of governance similar to the Confucian idea of *Tian Ming* (Mandate from Heaven) and the cyclical Chinese cosmology that governs the Chinese mind? Where can one find parallelisms between Ibn Khaldūn's ideas and in the different strands of Chinese thought that spans the Moist, the Confucian, the Legalist as well as the Taoist schools of thought? Clearly some measure of focus is in order for we are here speaking of two great intellectual giants of two different worlds.

The influence of Ibn Khaldūn on Islamic as well as Western and Indian scholarship is undeniable. Much of his ideas have proven to be seminal in our understanding of civilizational developments not only in the Berber-Arab context but also across civilizations. While the impact of Ibn Khaldūn's ideas on western thinking is well documented<sup>2</sup>, the connection, much less influence, of Ibn Khaldūn's ideas on Chinese contemporary thought is little studied. Indeed, the study of such movements of ideas between Islamic and Chinese philosophies is lacking and deserves the attention of Muslim and Chinese scholars alike. With regards to Ibn Khaldūn, what seems to be missing is a study of this great sociologist-historian-philosopher's ideas with similar ideas about civilization and human socio-historical development emanating from Chinese thought.

In any comparative analysis, the first question is one of the very basis of comparison. Are we comparing apples with oranges? Is there a basis of comparing Ibn Khaldūn with Confucius? It seems that Ibn Khaldūn and Confucius could not be more further removed, one from the other. On one hand we have Ibn Khaldūn, the usual appellation for Abū Zaid 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Khaldūn, the celebrated Muslim intellectual credited to be the true founder of the discipline we today call sociology. Born in Tunis on the 27th of May, 1332 C.E. (Ramadan 1, 732 A.H.), Ibn Khaldūn lived in

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) arguably, one of the greatest modern western historians is known to have been profoundly influenced by the ideas of Ibn Khaldūn. Rosenthal (1969) cites A.J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. 3, *The Growth of Civilizations*, 2ed. (1935) where Toynbee describes the *Muqaddimah* as "undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place."