

Scholars Remember Dr. Hossein Ziai: 1944–2011

by GHAZZAL DABIRI and MUHAMMAD SAHIMI

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Ghazzal Dabiri on Ziai's role as mentor and "doktorvater."

[**obituary**] The Iranian community and Iranian studies have suffered a great loss. On Wednesday, August 24, Professor [Hossein Ziai](#) passed away. Dr. Ziai was professor of Islamic and Iranian studies, inaugural holder of the Jahangir and Eleanor Amuzegar Chair in Iranian Studies, and the director of Iranian studies at UCLA, where he had taught since 1988. He received his Ph.D. in Islamic philosophy from Harvard University in 1976 and his B.S. in physics and mathematics from Yale University in 1967. Before joining the UCLA faculty, Dr. Ziai taught at Tehran University, Sharif University, Harvard University, Brown University, and Oberlin College. His numerous publications dealt with Islamic philosophy, the [Iranian illuminationist school of philosophy](#), and "Persian poetic wisdom."



Like many academics before him, his bio above is now his obituary and it says little of the man himself. Professor Ziai possessed a brilliant mind and noble spirit. He had a lion's roar but the meow of his kitten as a ringtone. He made his life's work the development and growth of Iranian studies in the United States, publishing books and writing articles and building one of the largest and most successful Iranian studies program in the country. He inspired scores of undergrads with his love of classical Persian literature and medieval philosophy.

His passion was training the next generation of Iranists. In German, the word for Ph.D. adviser is *doktorvater*, a loose translation for which in English might be "doctoral father." Certainly Professor Ziai was like a father to many of us. He knew our strengths and weaknesses, he knew how and when and just how far to push us. He knew when we needed a little bit of encouragement and joyfully gave it. He understood the nature of academia better than anyone I knew and taught us how to navigate those murky waters by example. He was a fierce advocate of his graduate students and he was unwavering in his support for us even long after

we graduated. He was proud when we succeeded and considered the accomplishments of each and everyone of us in the field a victory for the longevity of Iranian studies.

He was a fair and judicious man who upheld the highest moral standards and expected no less from his colleagues, his students, and fellow compatriots -- Iranian and American alike. He stood up against injustice and he was an outspoken advocate of the Green Movement and the people of Iran.

Friends and family will remember him with love and affection. And I can say with full confidence that his graduate students, past and present, will honor his memory. We will teach and encourage the next generation of Iranists. We will instill a love of Persian literature, language, and culture in our own students, and as my dear friend and Professor Ziai's graduate student Shervin Emami proclaimed yesterday, "We will follow in your 'Path of Illumination.'" Farewell, dear *doktorvater*.

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Muhammad Sahimi on Ziai's many scholarly achievements.

Professor Ziai served as the elected president of the Société Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences et des Philosophies Arabes et Islamiques (SIHSPAI) and vice president of the Centre d'Histoire des Sciences et des Philosophies Arabes et Médiévales (CHSPAM-CNRS). He was an elected member of the Société Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale, and he served on the editorial boards of many international academic journals. He also served two terms as chair of the UCLA Senate's Committee on Academic Freedom.

Professor Ziai published several volumes and numerous articles on Islamic philosophy, especially the Iranian/Islamic illuminationist tradition. His books include *Philosophy of Mathematics* (in Persian); *Anvariyya (The Realm of Lights)*; *Knowledge and Illumination*; *Shahrazur's Commentary on Hikmat al-Ishraq*; *The Book of Radiance*; *The Ball and Polo Stick, or the Book of Ecstasy*, with W. M. Thackston, Jr.; *The Philosophy of Illumination*, with John Walbridge; and *Ibn Kammuna's Al-Tanqihat fi Sharh al-Talwihat*, with Ahmed Alwishah. He also contributed many chapters to edited volumes, including "Beyond Philosophy" in *Myth and Philosophy*, edited by Frank Reynolds and David Tracy; "The Source and Nature of Authority," in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by Charles Butterworth; and three chapters in *The Routledge History of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by Sayyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman. He was also the author of numerous articles on Islamic philosophy and Iranian/Islamic intellectual traditions.

In 1998, Professor Ziai established the [Bibliotheca Iranica: Intellectual Traditions Series](#) and was its editor-in-chief until his death. To date, thirteen volumes in the series have been published: *The Book of Radiance*; *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises*; *The Ball and Polo Stick*; *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Poetics: Seven Essays*; *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran*; *Nasir-e Khusraw's Book of Travels*; *Shahrestanihay-e Eranshahr*; *Jamali-yi Dihlawi's Mirror of Meanings*; *Ibn Kammuna's Al-Tanqihat fi Sharh al-Talwihat*; *The Aura of Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship*; *Three Memoirs of Homayun*; *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*; and *Molla Sadra's Addenda on The Commentary on The Philosophy of Illumination: Part One on The Rules of Thought*. Three additional volumes are being prepared for publication.

Professor Ziai was a committed ally of the Green Movement, as revealed in this [interview](#) in which he explains his thoughts on the movement and Iran's future. Professor Hamid Dabashi of Columbia University offered this [tribute](#) to him: "Hossein Ziai was a world authority on the philosophy of Shahab ad-Din Yahya ibn Habash Suhrawardi and his Illuminationist School of Philosophy. He was one of the finest philosophical minds of our time, and deeply committed to the cause of democracy in his homeland. He was an ardent supporter of the Green Movement in Iran, and wrote some of the most moving pieces in *Jaras* in support of democratic uprising in Iran. His unwavering moral voice will be sorely missed."

Professor Ziai is survived by his wife Mahasti, his son Dadali, his daughter-in-law Stephanie, and his granddaughters Malia and Acacia.

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