

Listening to Sages: Divination, Omens, and the Rhetoric of Antiquity in Wang Chong's *Lunheng*

Michael Puett (Cambridge, Mass.)

Wang Chong 王充 (27 – ca. 100) is well known for his constant attacks on what he claimed to be some of the dominant views of his day. Take, for example, his criticism of the view that Heaven operates in the world such that the good are rewarded and the bad punished:

世論行善者福至，為惡者禍來。福禍之應，皆天也，人為之，天應之。

In the current age, people assert that, for those who practice the good, good fortune will arrive; for those who practice the bad, bad fortune will come. The responses of good and bad fortune are all from Heaven. Humans act, and Heaven responds.¹

The problem, according to Wang Chong, is that the world simply does not operate this way. The good follow the way, but they do not necessarily live long, and those who go against Heaven will not necessarily have shortened lives either:

天下善人寡，惡人眾。善人順道，惡人違天。然夫惡人之命不短，善人之年不長。

In all under Heaven the good are few and the bad are many. The good follow the way and the bad go against Heaven. Now, the fate of the bad is not short, and the years of the good are not long.²

In this particular case, Wang Chong's critique is based upon empirical claims: bad people are numerous and are not necessarily short-lived; good people are few and not necessarily long-lived.

But elsewhere, Wang Chong's critiques are based upon other claims than empirical evidence. Take, for example, his recurrent attacks against those who overly revere the texts of antiquity. To make the point, Wang Chong explicitly criticizes several of the past writings from sages and worthies, including Confucius himself,³ Mencius,⁴ and Han Feizi.⁵ His main move in these critiques is to demonstrate that contradictions and errors exist in the texts and that they therefore cannot be seen as repositories of absolute knowledge.

Relatedly, Wang Chong points out that, beyond the contradictions and errors one can find in any one text, the attempt to base all knowledge upon the early texts is doomed anyway, because the sages disagreed with each other:

1 Wang Chong, *Lunheng* 論衡, "Fuxu" 福虛, chapter 20, (*Lunheng zhuzi suoyin* 論衡逐字索引, Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series [ICS edition], Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies, 1996), 20/74/16. Here and throughout my discussion of Wang Chong, my translations of the *Lunheng* have been aided greatly by those given by Alfred Forke in his *Lun-Heng, Part I: Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch'ung* (repr. New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1962).

2 *Lunheng*, "Fuxu," 20/78/14–15.

3 Wang Chong, *Lunheng*, "Wen Kong" 問孔, chapter 28.

4 *Lunheng*, "Ci Meng" 刺孟, chapter 30.

5 *Lunheng*, "Fei Han" 非韓, chapter 29.

案賢聖之言，上下多相違；其文，前後多相伐者，世之學者，不能知也。

That the words of sages oppose each other, and their writings attack each other, is something that scholars of today are unable to understand.⁶

So how can we fully follow texts that do not even agree amongst themselves?

Elsewhere, Wang Chong will use yet other criteria to criticize the views of his day. Take, for example, Wang Chong's attack on the idea that an anthropomorphic Heaven offers us guidance by sending us signs:

論災異〔者〕，謂古之人君為政失道，天用災異譴告之也。（…）曰：此疑也。夫國之有災異也，猶家人之有變怪也。有災異，謂天譴告人君，有變怪，天復譴告家人乎？

In talking about calamities and strange events, they say that in antiquity, when a ruler lost the way in practicing statecraft, Heaven would use calamities and strange events to reprimand him. I say: This is doubtful. A state having calamities and strange events is like a person having changes and irregularities. If we say that calamities and strange events are Heaven reprimanding a ruler, then, are changes and irregularities also Heaven reprimanding the person?⁷

In passages such as these, Wang Chong is clearly attacking the omenology of his day, lampooning the idea that Heaven is an active deity who can send down omens to warn humans about the wisdom of a given ruler. Wang Chong's main mode of critique against such an idea is largely ridicule: he argues that it is nonsensical to think of Heaven as being like a human who reprimands inferiors.

In short, Wang Chong appears happy to use a range of different methods to criticize contemporary views. As Michael Loewe has argued:

Expressing as he does views that were somewhat exceptional to the great body of Chinese thought, Wang Chong's main characteristic is his independence of mind and his general refusal to accept the assumptions and dogmas of his contemporaries, without being given good reason to do so.⁸

But if neither Heaven nor the ancient sages can be accepted as a proper basis for knowledge, then what is such a proper basis? What does Wang Chong put in their place? And on what authority does he justify them, once the authorities of tradition and Heaven have been rejected?

Loewe argues that Wang Chong represented an attempt to develop a "rationalist approach"⁹:

In addition to his repeated rejection of the sacred authority ascribed to some traditional texts or teachers, Wang Chong sets out to find a rational explanation of the phenomena observed in the heavens and on earth, and in the history and conduct of man.¹⁰

However, as Loewe correctly points out, Wang Chong is not fully successful in founding such a rational explanation. While critiquing traditional forms of authority, he does establish a consistent rational foundation for his own claims:

6 *Lunheng*, "Wen Kong," 28/121/19–20.

7 *Lunheng*, "Qiangao" 譴告, chapter 42, 42/196/8 ff.

8 Michael Loewe, "The Religious and Intellectual Background," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume I: The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C. - A.D. 220*, ed. Twitchett, Denis and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986), 698. (All romanizations have been changed to *pinyin*.)

9 *Idem*.

10 *Idem*.

To modern eyes, however, there are some flaws in Wang Chong's method of argument. Often this springs *ex silentio*, and he does not seem to allow for the difficulty, or even the impossibility, of assembling all the information that may be relevant to his topic. Equally serious is his habit of assuming the validity of certain principles without demonstrable proof, and of subsequently rejecting a statement, belief, or opinion simply because it runs counter to those principles. Argument in a circle of this type suffers from precisely those faults which Wang Chong was quick to castigate in others.¹¹

Given that Wang Chong does not develop a rational foundation, then what was Wang Chong trying to do? If he is not trying to establish rational foundations for knowledge, then what was he doing? And why was a critique of the purported view of his contemporaries such an important part of his project – even to the point that he seems comfortable using almost any criterion to make critiques? An analysis of Wang Chong's rhetoric should help us to answer these questions.

Sages and Great Peace

Let us begin by returning to the question of omenology. We have already seen a first brief example of Wang Chong's critique of the idea that an active Heaven offers us guidance by sending us signs. But it is important to note that Wang Chong is not arguing that omens *per se* do not exist. Take, for example, the following statement concerning what happens when Great Peace (*taiping* 太平)¹² is established among humans:

百姓安，而陰陽和；陰陽和，則萬物育；萬物育，則奇瑞出。

When the hundred families are settled, the *yin* and *yang* are harmonized. When the *yin* and *yang* are harmonized, the myriad things flourish. When the myriad things flourish, strange omens emerge.¹³

When order is established in the human realm, the natural world is affected for the better and strange omens are generated.

This, of course, raises a crucial question: if proper behavior on the part of humans can indeed affect natural phenomena for the better and result in the emergence of omens, then why precisely is omenology a bad thing? Heaven may not be an anthropomorphic deity, consciously sending down signs of his pleasure and displeasure; and the responses in the natural world to proper order being established among humans may emerge because of the spontaneous workings of the cosmos. But, still, if proper order being created among humans does bring about changes in the natural world, and specifically brings about the emergence of omens, then why does Wang Chong oppose omenology?

To answer this question, let us discuss in more depth the issue of the creation of order among humans. Wang Chong is consistent in describing how this occurs: it is done by sage rulers. Sage rulers are those who are able to create what Wang Chong calls Great Peace – an era when humanity and therefore the natural world are properly ordered:

能致太平者，聖人也

Those able to bring about Great Peace (*taiping*) are sages.¹⁴

11 *Idem.*, 699.

12 *Lunheng*, “Xuan Han” 宣漢, chapter 57, 57/252/8.

13 *Lunheng*, “Xuan Han,” 57/252/9–10.

14 *Lunheng*, “Xuan Han,” 57/254/1.

Having a sage in power results in the emergence of Great Peace. Moreover, Wang Chong never mentions any way for humanity to achieve Great Peace other than through a sage.

So is Wang Chong concerned that humanity has lost the Great Peace that characterized antiquity, and that the main problem now is to educate rulers to again bring Great Peace to the realm? Interestingly, this is not what Wang Chong perceives to be the problem of the day:

儒者稱五帝、三王致天下太平，漢興已來，未有太平。彼謂五帝、三王致太平，漢未有太平者，見五帝、三王聖人也，聖人之德，能致太平；謂漢不太平者，漢無聖帝也。

The scholars state that the five thearchs and three kings brought about Great Peace for all under Heaven, but since the time the Han arose there has not yet been Great Peace. In saying that the five thearchs and three kings brought about Great Peace but that the Han has not yet had Great Peace, they are recognizing that the five thearchs and three kings were sages. It is the potency of the sage that is able to bring about Great Peace. Saying that the Han does not have Great Peace is to say that the Han has not had sage rulers.¹⁵

Wang Chong is not concerned with educating rulers. What concerns him are the beliefs among the non-rulers. And he is particularly bothered by the fact that the Han is not viewed by sufficient numbers of contemporaries as having had sages in power who could bring about Great Peace.

能致太平者，聖人也，世儒何以謂世未有聖人？

Those able to bring about Great Peace are sages. Why do scholars of the present generation say that there are no sages in this age?¹⁶

One of the reasons for scholars thinking there to be no sages in the Han is due to omens: none of the omens associated with the great sages of the past have appeared during the Han. For Wang Chong this is, again, not because omens do not appear with sages. On the contrary, they do. To quote again the passage mentioned above:

百姓安，而陰陽和；陰陽和，則萬物育；萬物育，則奇瑞出。

When the hundred families are settled, the *yin* and *yang* are harmonized. When the *yin* and *yang* are harmonized, the myriad things flourish. When the myriad things flourish, strange omens emerge.¹⁷

The point, then, is not that portents do not exist. Wang Chong's concern is rather about any attempt to posit an absolute system by which to know if a given portent is a sign that a sage is creating a period of Great Peace. Such a system assumes that the portents created in periods of great peace are the same, and Wang Chong argues strenuously that they are not:

且夫太平之瑞，猶聖王之相也。聖王骨法未必同，太平之瑞何為當等？

The omens of Great Peace are like the physiognomy of sage rulers. The form of sage rulers are not necessarily identical; how could the omens of Great Peace be of the same type?¹⁸

The consequence of having such a system is that, even if they are living in a period of Great Peace, people will fail to realize it:

15 Lunheng, "Xuan Han," 57/252/3–5.

16 Lunheng, "Xuan Han," 57/254/1.

17 Lunheng, "Xuan Han," 57/252/9–10.

18 Lunheng, "Xuan Han," 57/252/14–15.

夫帝王聖相前後不同，則得瑞古今不等。而今王無鳳鳥、河圖，為未太平，妄矣。

Now, if the physiognomies of sages and rulers have not been the same over time, then from antiquity to the present one would not obtain omens of the same type. It is wrong to say that, since the present rulers have no phoenix nor river diagram, there is not yet Great Peace.¹⁹

And Wang Chong believes that now is one of those times: all under Heaven is experiencing Great Peace under a sage, and yet no one knows it.

實者、天下已太平矣。未有聖人，何以致之？

In reality, all under Heaven is already at Great Peace. If there is not yet a sage, how could this have been brought about?²⁰

The Han has indeed had sage rulers, but, because of the mistaken beliefs of the day, they have not been recognized as such.

Indeed, the beliefs of the day have resulted in a situation where no sage could be recognized as such. It has reached the point where, even if Yao and Shun were to be re-born, they would not be recognized as sages:

使堯、舜更生，恐無聖名。

If we could make Yao and Shun be born again, I fear they would not be seen as sages.²¹

Wang Chong's concern with omenology, then, is simply that the way it is practiced is making it impossible for sages to be recognized.

This same point underlies the concern Wang Chong has with divination. Here too, Wang Chong fully accepts that omens of divination do indeed appear, just as omens in the natural world appear. The point, however, is that the divinatory signs and omens are extraordinary. As such, no pre-given system can account for what omens will appear. Diviners, by looking for the same signs in one situation as occurred in an earlier one, thereby misunderstand the omen. Consequently, they will read a good state as a bad one:

夫筮筮龜卜，猶聖王治世；卜筮兆數，猶王治瑞應。瑞應無常，兆數詭異。詭異則占者惑，無常則議者疑。疑則謂平未治，惑則謂吉不良。

Divination by shell and stalk is like the governance of a sage ruler. The signs of divination are like the omens that respond to a ruler's governance. Omens are extraordinary; signs are unusual. Because they are unusual, diviners are deluded. Because they are extraordinary, the advisors are suspicious. Because they are suspicious, they call a period of peace to be one that is not yet brought to order. Because they are deluded, they call what is auspicious to be not good.²²

The problem with divination is therefore the same as the one with omenology: diviners believe in a set system, just as omenologists do. And that leads them into error.

Indeed, Wang Chong goes on to criticize those who say divination cannot be used. As he explicitly states:

19 *Lunheng*, "Xuan Han," 57/252/16–17.

20 *Lunheng*, "Xuan Han," 57/253/5.

21 *Lunheng*, "Xuan Han," 57/254/8.

22 *Lunheng*, "Bushu" 卜筮, chapter 71, 71/310/14–15.

夫卜筮非不可用，卜筮之人占之誤也。

It is not that divination cannot be used; it is that the diviners prognosticate incorrectly.²³

Wang Chong gives as an example the story of a divination prior to the invasion of Yue by Lu. The diviners read the divination as saying that Lu ought not invade, whereas Confucius read it as saying that Lu should invade. Confucius was right, and Lu successfully invaded Yue.²⁴

The problem, then, is not that signs cannot be read properly. They most definitely can. The problem is that most diviners are not sages, as Confucius was.

In other words, Wang Chong is not arguing that omens do not exist, nor is he arguing that divination is impossible. He is rather claiming that, precisely because they are extraordinary, omens and signs cannot be explicated through any kind of system or any kind of precedent. And, since diviners and omenologists base their interpretations on a pre-given system or on omens that occurred in the past, they will misinterpret the signs.

In short, Wang Chong's overall view is that, when a true sage does arise, Great Peace will emerge, good *qi* will be generated, and good omens will emerge. But this does not mean that disasters will not occur, or that the same omens as appeared in the past will appear again. The key is that Wang Chong wants to bring to an end a period in which signs will be improperly interpreted as revealing a lack of sage rulership.

Listening to Sages

So then how do we establish the proper path? Wang Chong's answer is surprisingly simple: we must listen to sages, for they will know. If a sage is a ruler, then we should follow him, instead of allowing our mistaken views of antiquity or divine rewards, or the mistaken interpretations of omenologists and diviners, to lead us astray.

For Wang Chong, the goal is not to try to use omenology and signs to discern the intentions of Heaven. The goal is rather to listen to sages. And sages themselves do not try to read the intentions of Heaven by searching for signs of Heaven's intentions either. They rather do so by looking within, for the mind of a sage will match the intentions of Heaven:

皆以人心效天意。

In all of these cases it is taking the human mind to verify the intentions of Heaven.²⁵

For Wang Chong, the important acts done in the past occurred not when people followed the instructions of Heaven but rather when sages followed their own minds, which, by definition, were also the intentions of Heaven:

文、武之卒，成王幼少，周道未成，周公居攝，當時豈有上天之教哉？周公推心合天志也。

When Wen and Wu died, King Cheng was young and the way of the Zhou was not yet complete. The Duke of Zhou temporarily took the office. At that time, where were the instructions of high Heaven? The Duke of Zhou turned to his mind and harmonized with the intention of Heaven.²⁶

23 *Lunheng*, "Bushì," 71/310/26.

24 *Lunheng*, "Bushì," 71/310/18–23.

25 *Lunheng*, "Qiangao," 42/200/10.

26 *Lunheng*, "Qiangao," 42/200/12–13.

The key, then, is that people must learn to follow sages. Instead, however, people refuse to listen to sages and instead seek the views of Heaven in omens.

上天之心，在聖人之胸，及其譴告，在聖人之口。不信聖人之言，反然災異之氣，求索上天之意。

The mind of high Heaven resides in the chest of the sage, and its reprimands reside in the mouth of the sages. But they do not trust the words of the sages and turn instead to the energies of disasters and abnormalities to seek the intentions of high Heaven.²⁷

In short, one of Wang Chong's deep concerns is that the contemporary view of omens will make listening to sages impossible.

Sagehood and Antiquity

But here we seem to be arriving at a contradiction. Wang Chong is arguing that only sages can create Great Peace, and only sages like Confucius can accurately divine. But how can this be reconciled with Wang Chong's attacks on his contemporaries for overly revering sages in the past? If sages make errors, then why should they be revered now?

Let us look at Wang Chong's critiques in more depth:

世儒學者，好信師而是古，以為賢聖所言皆無非，專精講習，不知難問。夫賢聖下筆造文，用意詳審，尚未可謂盡得實，況倉卒吐言，安能皆是？

The scholars of today love to trust their teachers and affirm antiquity, taking what the sages and worthies spoke as without error. They concentrate their essence explaining and putting into practice their sayings, but they do not understand how to ask difficult questions. Now, when the worthies and sages used the brush and created writings, they utilized their intentions and examined issues in particular. But it cannot be said that they fully obtained the substance; moreover, how is it possible for particular words uttered on the spur of the moment to always be accurate?²⁸

No sage is perfect, no sage ever fully obtained the substance, and no sage was always accurate. Accordingly, it is always a mistake to over-value any one figure from the past, and it is always a mistake not to ask difficult questions of any text, even if from a great sage.

But then why should we grant contemporary sages so much authority? Is it that contemporary sages are better than those in antiquity? Not at all. But the opposite view bothers Wang Chong very deeply. Indeed, one of the things that most concerns Wang Chong is the prevalence of the view in his day that things were better in antiquity than they are in the present:

語稱上世之人，侗長佼好，堅強老壽，百歲左右；下世之人，短小陋醜，夭折早死。

There is a saying that men of earlier times were big, handsome, strong, and lived a long life of about a hundred years; men of more recent times are small, ugly, and die young.²⁹

The problem, then, is that his contemporaries are so devaluing the current age:

今世之士者，尊古卑今也。

Scholars of the present generation revere antiquity and demean the present.³⁰

27 *Lunheng*, "Qiangao," 42/200/13–14.

28 *Lunheng*, "Wen Kong," 28/121/17–18.

29 *Lunheng*, "Qishi" 齊世, chapter 56, 56/248/8–9.

30 *Lunheng*, "Qishi," 56/250/16–17.

Those who so over-value the past are also under-valuing the present. In fact, according to Wang Chong, there is no inherent difference between antiquity and the present:

此言妄也。夫上世治者、聖人也，下世治者、亦聖人也。聖人之德，前後不殊，則其治世，古今不異。上世之天、下世之天也。

These words are wrong. Those who ruled in earlier times were sages; those who rule in more recent times are also sages. The power of sages earlier and later do not differ, and the way of ordering the world has not changed from ancient times to the modern. The Heaven of earlier times is the same as the Heaven of recent times.³¹

If people believe that antiquity was better than the present, then, by definition, no figure now could ever be seen favorably in comparison with those of the past. This makes it impossible for true sages today to be recognized, even if they are in fact superior to the earlier sages:

使當今說道深於孔、墨，名不得與之同。

If today there were one better than Confucius and Mozi in speaking of the Way, his name would not be placed as the equal of theirs.³²

As with omenology, then, Wang Chong's fear is that current beliefs will make it impossible to listen to the sages. In the case at hand, an over-reverence for figures from the past will result in the bar being set too high for current sages.

And the content of Wang Chong's critiques of revered figures from the past reveals the same concern with recognizing sages of the present. For example, with Mencius, one of Wang Chong's explicit criticisms is Mencius's notion that a sage should arrive every five hundred years.³³ Wang Chong argues that, historically, several periods, in early antiquity and the beginning of the Zhou dynasty, had successive sages on the throne.³⁴ Here again, a notion that sages only appear rarely is something Wang Chong finds unacceptable.

Sages and Writing

The implication of these arguments is that what we need to do is listen to sages. And they must be current sages, since any sage from the past, including those who wrote, will make errors, and, regardless, to follow the texts from the past completely will simply ensure that teachings meant for one time will be applied to a different situation, and errors will ensue from that as well. So it still requires a sage to tell us what teachings to use from the past and how they should be applied. Thus, we must follow current sages.

But this raises two problems. First, what we should do if there are no sages in a given generation? Should we then follow past texts? No. We then simply follow worthies, who are second to sages but essentially the same:

31 *Lunheng*, "Qishi," 56/248/10–13.

32 *Lunheng*, "Qishi," 56/250/17.

33 *Mengzi* 孟子 (*Mengzi zhuzi suoyin* 孟子逐字索引 [ICS edition], Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies, 1995), 14.3/24/24.

34 *Lunheng*, "Ci Meng," 30/142/21–26.

世無聖人，安所得聖人之言？賢人庶幾之才，亦聖人之次也。

If in a generation there are not sages, where can the words of sages be obtained? From the worthies, who have almost the same talents and are a second only to the sages.³⁵

But there is also another problem. If there is no distinction between antiquity and the present, and if sages now are the same as sages in the past, then clearly sages now, just like sages in the past, make mistakes. So then we still cannot grant too much authority to sages in the present. But how do we limit their power, if our goal is to listen to them?

Here, antiquity offers a model – not because antiquity is perfect but because, since it is the same as the present, we can do what worked in the past. And what worked in the past is that, along with having sage rulers, there were also those sages, as well as worthies who, when necessary, wrote as well. Thus, if a sage for whatever reason does not serve as a ruler, then he can at least present his ideas for how to build a proper order in the form of writing – either because he himself writes down his thoughts or because his disciples write down his sayings for him. In other words, what Wang Chong wants is a continuation of a culture in which, if necessary, a sage or a worthy can provide teachings or write to correct errors.

There are various reasons why this might be necessary. It may be necessary because the political order has failed: if a sage is not granted political power, then he may need to write instead to correct his age. Indeed, this is what Confucius did:

孔子作《春秋》，周民弊也。故采求毫毛之善，貶纖介之惡，撥亂世，反諸正，人道浹，王道備。（...）是故周道不弊，則民不文薄；民不文薄，《春秋》不作。

Confucius created the *Spring and Autumn Annals* when the Zhou had degenerated. He therefore held up the tiniest good and criticized the smallest bad; he discarded the disorder and restored the correct. The way of the people and the way of the rulers were put in order.... Thus, if the way of the Zhou had not declined, the people would not have been uncultured; if the people had not been uncultured, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* would not have been created.³⁶

Or a sage may have to write to correct other texts that have introduced errors into the culture:

楊、墨之學不亂傳義，則孟子之《傳》不造。

If the teachings of Yang [Zhu] and Mo[zhi] had not disordered the transmitted rightness [of Confucius], then the transmissions of Mencius would not have been created.³⁷

This is why Wang Chong claims that he himself has to write:

是故《論衡》之造也，起眾書並失實，虛妄之言勝真美也。

The reason for the making of the *Lunheng* is that numerous books have lost what is genuine, and empty words have overtaken what is true and beautiful.³⁸

Thus, Wang Chong is writing to correct the errors of the day. And, as we have seen, the errors of the day are for him those that are now preventing people from listening to the sages. The fact that no sage is perfect, therefore is simply all the more reason for sages to be recognized and listened to. For any errors with one sage can simply be corrected by other sages (or worthies). Again, therefore, the key is to listen to sages.

35 *Lunheng*, “Qiangao,” 42/200/14–15.

36 *Lunheng*, “Dui zuo” 對作, chapter 84, 84/362/11–14.

37 *Lunheng*, “Dui zuo,” 84/362/14.

38 *Lunheng*, “Dui zuo,” 84/362/23.

Awaiting the Sage

So what is Wang Chong trying to do? A common reading of Wang Chong is that he is trying to critique the views of the foolish, contradictory, and superstitious views of his day. This is certainly true enough as far as it goes – Wang Chong does indeed spend almost the entirety of the *Lunheng* attacking beliefs of the day. But it would be difficult to argue that he does so in the name of something we might call rationality – since, again, he never provides a rational basis of knowledge to replace one founded on either antiquity or Heaven.

What I would like to suggest here is that one of the keys underlying Wang Chong's arguments can be found in his views of sages. Wang Chong is committed to the idea that sages are necessary to provide order. If one adds up the things about the contemporary age that bother Wang Chong so much, one of the things they all have in common is that they would prevent sages from being recognized as such. If previous sages are overly-revered, then current sages will not be able to have the influence they deserve. If an accident is read as a sign of Heavenly displeasure in a ruler, then that ruler would be unfairly discredited. If previous sages are seen as infallible, then people would judge contemporaries who make errors as not being sages. In short, one of the things that concerns Wang Chong so deeply is that contemporary practices would make it impossible for a sage to be recognized.

As a consequence, rulers of today can never be seen as sage rulers, and scholars of today can never be seen as sagely authors. When seen in this light, therefore, Wang Chong's critiques of the classics and of previous sages such as Confucius and Mencius are not attempts to discredit the authority of sages but rather attempts to make a clearing for more sages to be recognized.

What, then, is the ground of knowledge for Wang Chong? The answer would appear to be: sages. Sages are the ones who know what to do. If a sage is a ruler, he will create Great Peace. If he is not a ruler, he will write texts, or his disciples will record his sayings. Not only do we not need a rational system of knowledge, such systems are in fact dangerous – for they can result in our failing to listen to sages.

The Rhetoric of a Sage

Wang Chong is in many ways nostalgic for the past – a past when sage rulers were recognized as such, and a past when sages wrote texts and disciples listened to them as sages. But unlike the nostalgia that (he claims) his contemporaries hold for the past, Wang Chong thinks such a world can be re-created by simply changing the current beliefs that prevent sages from being recognized. In other words, he is not nostalgic for an age of sages – for the age of sages is not located only in the past. He is rather nostalgic for an age when people listened to them.

But if Wang Chong is nostalgic for such days, then is his own work intended to be a sagely writing? If so then what does Wang Chong think that a ruler of the day should do? This is a question that all of the sagely texts Wang Chong looks back to would have answered. Interestingly, though, Wang Chong provides no answers. Indeed, if one compares Wang Chong to those sages he reveres from the past, one of the striking differences is precisely that Wang Chong in fact offers precious little in the way of actual recommendations – recommendations for proper political or ethical behavior, or, frankly, for anything else. Moreover, his arguments rarely add up to a coherent position. Instead, as we have seen, he often is willing to use almost any method to criticize the beliefs of the day. The goal, as we have seen, is not to develop a positive program of

what we should do but rather to make a clearing for sages to be recognized. Clearly, his interests lie in places other than developing an argument for how the world should be organized.

By his own definition, his lack of a positive program would not prove that he is not a sage – even sages with positive programs are never perfect. Nonetheless, this is hardly a work that would appear to be in the same tradition as the sagely writings of Confucius and Mencius that Wang Chong wants to continue. Wang Chong may want to continue the earlier world, but his own writing style very much betrays the shift that concerns him so much.³⁹

In short, what we see in Wang Chong is a fundamental tension, and it is a tension very telling for the age in which he wrote. On the one hand, Wang Chong is clearly nostalgic for an earlier age in which rulers were recognized sages, as well as an age in which teachers and thinkers were recognized as sages. At the same time, however, Wang Chong cannot be said to be writing in the mode of the sages of the past, explaining how to order the world. Instead of writing with the authority of a sage, putting forth a program to order the world, Wang Chong is instead writing a mammoth work to undercut any possibility that sages of the day will not be recognized. As much as he detests the notion that the age of sages is over, Wang Chong's own mode of writing betrays precisely that sense.

Perhaps the best way to describe Wang Chong is that he is trying to clear the ground for a true sage to emerge and be recognized. Far from being a rationalist thinker, then, Wang Chong could even be seen, in a very ironic way, to reveal some of the same millenarian tendencies that would play out so strongly over the next century: what we must do is simply follow sages. The differences with such millenarian tendencies, of course, are that Wang Chong wants to argue that the emergence of sages is (relatively speaking) frequent, rather than something that happens rarely, and he wants to argue that sages follow their own minds, rather than being bearers of divine revelation. Nonetheless, the contrast with the rhetoric of a Mozi or a Mencius is striking. Instead of playing the role of a sage explaining how to behave and how to organize the world, Wang Chong plays the role of a critic, demolishing any belief that would prevent sages from being recognized. But he says almost nothing about what we should actually do. In other words, Wang Chong's position is one of awaiting a true sage, rather than writing in the mode of one. And, if at times it seems that he wants to play the role of a sage himself, he certainly fails to do so. The rhetoric of the *Lunheng* is a one that, to some extent, reveals its own worst fears.

39 I have discussed this point more fully in my "The Temptations of Sagehood, or: The Rise and Decline of the Book in Early China," in *Books in Numbers*, ed. Wilt Idema (forthcoming).