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The Philosophical
Thought of Wang Chong

Alexus McLeod

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This book, even though my fifth in order, is in many ways my first. Most of the initial research and writing was completed between ten and six years ago. It was my first planned book after I finished my dissertation and moved to my first job in Dayton, Ohio. Wang Chong was one of the first philosophers in the Chinese tradition I ever encountered. I was introduced to his work by David Branner, whose class in Early Chinese Literature I took as an undergraduate at the University of Maryland. The first paper I ever wrote on early Chinese thought was my term paper for that class, on what I took to be Wang Chong's "skepticism" (I've changed my view in the years since). Years later, during my graduate studies, I planned to work on a dissertation on the *Lunheng*, but ended up abandoning this project for something I thought (at the time) might have more philosophical cache and generate more interest. Instead, I wrote a paper on Wang Chong's philosophical method, which became my first professional publication (in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 2007), the ideas of which still form the basis of my view of Wang's central critical method. I revisited my idea for a book on Wang Chong after finishing my PhD and starting my career, but worked slowly on the project as I focused on publishing articles (a standard move for early-career academics). In 2011, I decided to devote my full attention to the book, but other projects kept getting in the way, and the Wang Chong book went onto the shelf over and over. I finally made it halfway through a draft by 2013, but could not find any publishers interested in what then seemed a fringe figure in the history of Chinese philosophy. So once again onto the shelf the project went. Luckily, there seems to have been a minor resurgence in interest in

Wang Chong and Han Dynasty philosophy in general since 2014 or so, which I attribute at least in part to the excellent new translations of important early Han texts such as *Huainanzi* and *Chunqiu Fanlu*. I finally picked up the project definitively off the shelf and finished the book in 2018, about 18 years (almost to the day) after I submitted my first written work in Chinese philosophy, also on Wang Chong. Finally being finished with this project feels like the close of a major chapter in my life (that has spanned almost half of it thus far!). There are far too many people to thank for their help along the way, but a few stand out. Thanks to David Branner for introducing me to Wang Chong, to Ning Yu (formerly at the University of Oklahoma, currently Penn State University) for helping me to understand the *Lunheng* in the original during my time at OU, to Bo Mou and Lajos Brons for very fruitful discussions about my work on Wang Chong that has appeared in the pages of *Comparative Philosophy*, and to all those I have had discussions with over the years on this interesting and important philosopher. The work here is in a different form than the one in which it was initially envisioned—I lost almost all of my translation of a number of important chapters of the *Lunheng* (along with a large amount of other work) when my computer was destroyed in May 2018, and with great sadness made the choice to move forward without these translated chapters (some of the important remains are included throughout the book). The book is lesser for it, but I hope I've still been able to offer something of value in my interpretation of Wang Chong's work. Finally, thanks as always to my sons Francis and Siddhu (who even helped me with a part of this book!) and my wife Shubhalaxmi.

CONTENTS

| | | |
|----------|---|------------|
| 1 | Introduction: Wang Chong and Philosophy in Early China | 1 |
| | <i>Methodologies of Philosophy, History, and Comparative Thought</i> | 19 |
| | <i>Description of Chapters</i> | 20 |
| 2 | Background, Writings, and Influence | 23 |
| | <i>Life and Historical Background</i> | 24 |
| | <i>Texts-Lunheng</i> | 39 |
| | <i>Intellectual Background and Han Thought</i> | 43 |
| 3 | Philosophical and Critical Method | 69 |
| | <i>Creation and Transmission</i> | 69 |
| | <i>Method and Application</i> | 84 |
| | <i>Epistemology: How Do We Gain Knowledge?</i> | 105 |
| | <i>Opening of 問孔 Wen Kong Questioning Confucius</i> | 126 |
| 4 | Truth: Properties and Pluralism | 131 |
| | <i>The Development of Shi 實 as a Central Concept of Truth</i> | 131 |
| | <i>Substantive Pluralism</i> | 159 |
| | <i>The Correspondence Intuition</i> | 166 |
| 5 | Naturalism: Tian and Qi | 181 |
| | <i>Nature and Naturalism in Early Chinese Thought: Was Wang a “Naturalist”?</i> | 181 |
| | <i>Tian and Ziran in Early Chinese Thought and the Lunheng</i> | 186 |

| | | |
|----------|---|------------|
| 6 | Free Will, Allotment, and Inborn Characteristics | 201 |
| | <i>Human Agency and Free Will</i> | 203 |
| | De 德 (<i>Potency</i>) | 208 |
| | Xiu 修 (<i>Cultivation</i>) | 212 |
| | Ziran 自然 (<i>Spontaneity</i>) | 216 |
| | Zhi 志 (<i>Will/Intention</i>) | 219 |
| | <i>Wang's Three Kinds of Allotment and Inborn Characteristics</i> | 223 |
| 7 | Conclusion: The Significance of Wang Chong's Philosophical Thought | 233 |
| | Bibliography | 237 |
| | Index | 245 |



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Wang Chong and Philosophy in Early China

This book represents an attempt to think through aspects of the thought of Wang Chong of concern to and that may aid in the work in contemporary philosophy. Of necessity, I have left out a number of important issues, even ones of philosophical interest. I make no claims to be comprehensive here, and this is one of the reasons I don't call this book a study of Wang Chong's thought. I am focused on what I deem to be (which is, admittedly subjective) the most important or interesting of Wang Chong's philosophical positions, and I attempt to recover, appraise, and develop these positions. This involves three different methods operative within each of the chapters, which I will try to be clear and keep distinct (even though, as with a lot of comparative and cross-boundary works, I suspect I will alienate numerous audiences).

The "sinological/historical" focus here will concern the attempt to recover facts about the textual history, cultural context, Wang's motivations, views, and so on in a way keeping as closely as possible to the context of Wang Chong's and Eastern Han thought. The "philosophical" focus involves two subfoci: the historical-philosophical, analyzing the theories Wang presents, along with the concepts included and the arguments Wang uses to establish positions, and the appraisal/appropriational, which considers the plausibility of these positions, possible objections and fixes, and their applicability to and usefulness in contemporary debates in philosophy concerning these concepts. It is this latter focus that in part explains my selection of certain aspects of Wang's thought and certain

positions for this book. The positions in the *Lunheng* of most interest to me, and I suspect that will also be of most interest to contemporary analytic philosophers, are those I focus on in this book. Even if use of this frame for Wang's thought is artificial and anachronistic in some sense (which I can't deny that it is), it is no more so than using contemporary historical techniques to understand early Chinese thinkers, or even using modern languages like English, for that matter, to understand the thought of early Chinese thinkers. It's unclear to me how the philosophical method of appraisal can be any *more* comparative or foreign, let alone "inauthentic" than any other method of appraisal and appropriation of these texts in use in contemporary academia.

The question confronts those who work in ancient Chinese thought—just how original or unique *was* Wang Chong, really? When Western thinkers first took notice of this interesting thinker, in the late nineteenth century with the revival of Chinese interest in his thought by critical Qing scholars, Wang was seen as an anomaly, a brilliant and completely unique representative of critical thought in the desert of scholasticism and scholarly conformity and stagnation that was the Han dynasty. Many authors spoke of Wang as representing the first stirrings of critical and even "scientific" thought in China. Even Joseph Needham, in the volumes of his magisterial classic "Science and Civilization in China", contributed to this view of Wang as the arch "proto-scientist" of the Eastern Han. "Science", of course, is a loaded word, as much now as it was back then. "Scientific" thought, as opposed to traditional, religious, or even philosophical thought, was supposed to be thought freed from the bias of background prejudices, information, and infection of traditions, literary canon, or environment. Of course, this pristine view of scientific thought has always been little more than a guiding myth. The inconvenient truth is that *no one* engages in intellectual work in this purely autonomous, disconnected, universalistic manner. All human thought is bound by human experience, tradition, history, and biological tendencies—including the "purest" science, the mechanics of Newton or the atomic theory of Bohr. To distinguish "scientific" from "non-scientific" thought outside of the actual practice of science is, in essence, to apply value categories generally fixed to the attempt to reject, criticize, or otherwise undermine tradition. And this is just what the earliest Western scholars to work on Wang saw going on in his work: Wang Chong as iconoclast, critic, and thus upholder of "scientific"

thought.¹ Although I will conclude that these scholars were not completely right about Wang, there was some sense in which Wang *was* a uniquely critical and less tradition-bound philosopher.

More recent Western studies, following the trend in Chinese scholarship, aimed to chip away this older view of Wang, emphasizing the ways in which Wang's thought was typical of late Eastern Han thinkers, and in which he was influenced by the surrounding cultural attitudes, which were shifting from earlier views dominant in the Western Han.² Indeed, there is good reason to see Wang as much closer to the norm than earlier scholars were able or willing to, as we see very similar views and sentiments expressed in the work of other Eastern Han thinkers such as Xu Gan, Xun Yue, Wang Fu, and Cui Shi (among others). A critical strain can be found in all of these authors, usually surrounding the same topics, and using similar methods to those of Wang Chong. Wang, of course, was the earliest of these thinkers, but not necessarily the most outstanding or unique in his adoption of these ideas and methods. Although I will conclude that these more recent interpreters are also missing something critical about Wang and that their views that Wang was simply a representative thinker cannot be completely accepted, there is also some sense in which Wang was not as far from the norm, as unique, as some interpreters made him out to be.

So why is Wang a philosopher we should care about, take seriously, or give priority to in a field of brilliant thinkers of the (Western and Eastern) Han like those mentioned above and many more? In short, what justifies a new book-length study on this enigmatic Eastern Han philosopher, who may be taken to have been fairly neglected in contemporary Chinese studies? It is important to note that, for all the familiarity with Wang among sinologists (I have not infrequently encountered scholars whose recognition of Eastern Han thinkers only extends to Wang Chong), there have

¹Including Alfred Forke, who wrote the first (and still only) complete translation of the *Lunheng* into English, Chang Chih-lien, "Wang Chong as Critic", in *Cina* 15 (1979), Lionello Lanciotti, *Wang Chong l'iconoclasta* (1997).

²Some examples of such studies, discussed further below, are Michael Puett's "Listening to Sages: Divination, Omens, and the Rhetoric of Antiquity in Wang Chong's *Lunheng*", *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005); Reinhard Emmerich, "Wang Chong's Praises for the Han Dynasty", *Monumenta Serica* 56 (2008).

been no book-length studies in English on Wang Chong since Western scholars first became acquainted with him in the nineteenth century.³

First, although Western scholars know of Wang Chong, they tend to know very little about his actual views, arguments, and philosophical import. Second, even in the extant non-English literature on Wang Chong, there has been hardly any consideration of Wang's *philosophical* contribution, and a thorough investigation of his innovations of philosophical method, as well as his arguments, theories, and concepts. This book focuses on these issues. Third, much of the material on Wang Chong has presented him in light of one of the two above scholarly tendencies of the last century or so—that is, to read him either as arch-skeptic, proto-scientist and iconoclast extraordinaire or as a typical Eastern Han malcontent, writing on well-worn themes and, for all the hay he makes of truth and criticism, not diverging widely from the accepted views or methods of his time. Both of these views, I argue in this book, fail to capture the real Wang Chong and the import of his work. No doubt Wang did not intend to do something *radically* new, to completely break with the past or with tradition in his thinking about method and truth, and, indeed, like most of his contemporaries, he saw his project in terms of *continuity* with the content and methods of the ancients. Within this context, however, Wang's actual work *was* highly innovative, and the method he devised was, if not completely unprecedented, a synthesis of a number of earlier strains of thought along with enormous creative work and innovation on Wang's part, resulting in a fairly radical reinterpretation of the entire early Chinese philosophical tradition as a whole. Even if Wang Chong was not the "iconoclast" earlier scholars claim he was (after all he unquestioningly accepts much from earlier thinkers and adopts more than a few tropes of his time), his thought was nonetheless highly innovative.

Of course, with his divergence from the tradition came some negatives as well. Wang Chong's style makes his writing sometimes difficult to follow, because he does not follow the standard constructions of his day.⁴ He can also be repetitive and tedious, spending hundreds of words to hammer home a single easily made point, tending to harp on the smallest and

³There have, however, been a number of studies in Chinese, of various aspects of Wang's work and influence, and a few in Japanese, Korean, German, and Nicolas Zufferey's study (in French). I look to most of this literature throughout the present book.

⁴The awkwardness of his style has been discussed by Michael Nylan, in "Han Classicists Writing About Their Own Tradition", *Philosophy East and West* 47: 2 (1996).

seemingly most insignificant of details to make his points, and sometimes becoming hopelessly bogged down in minutiae for no apparent reason. At other times, his arguments are too broad, making sweeping and general claims that don't take sufficient account of details. His arguments are not always sound or valid, and he can be at turns both very careful in his work and very haphazard. It is easy to be stricken by the depth and skill of his work in one passage and to be frustrated with its pedantry and weakness in another. On the whole, Wang is an excellent philosopher worthy of study, but his weaknesses can make it difficult for readers to appreciate what he is trying to do, without taking a great deal of work to piece together his often disparate thoughts. This is perhaps one of the reasons Wang was never held up as a more central figure in the tradition.⁵ His style is simply difficult to read and decipher, and even when one can follow him, it is often hard to see the point of what he's saying, without connecting parts of his work that he does not explicitly connect. If one has the patience to do this, however, one discovers a gold mine. Part of my goal in this book is to offer a blueprint for making these connections—a kind of key to connecting these ideas and understanding Wang's underlying views on a number of important philosophical topics.

A few main facts about Wang's situation and character explain his ability and willingness to reinterpret the tradition in the way he does—his independence from scholastic debates because of his lack of position and “school”. His stylistic and philosophical divergence from generally followed norms strengthened this alienation, and his lack of connection to any particular school made it possible for him to more widely criticize, diverge, and reinterpret, without the constraints that would have bound him were he beholden to a certain teacher or ideology. In some sense, it was Wang's failure in the public arena that allowed him to be as innovative and creative as he was. He had no responsibility to uphold the teachings of a particular sect or individual, and had plenty of personal reasons to attack the various positions of the entrenched groups and interests represented in officialdom. This situation made Wang well positioned to reinterpret the philosophical tradition he inherited. The critical, perhaps even antagonistic, character that seems to have been his genetic inheritance (discussed in Chap. 2) also probably played a role here as well. As Wang notes in his autobiographical chapter, his forefathers all ran into trouble

⁵ Another reason being that he is not easily fit into any particular “school” (*jia* 家), an issue discussed further below.

due to their contrarian natures, and any reader of the *Lunheng* can see that Wang himself had something of this nature.

The purpose and the organization of this book might strike some as somewhat unusual. I have not intended here to write a monograph on Wang Chong's *Lunheng* as a whole, a history of his time, or an interpretation of his specific arguments. Although I cover all of these things to some extent, the goal of this book is somewhat unique. I am certainly interested in historical context, in what shaped Wang's thought, and in uncovering adequate interpretation(s) of his thought. However, my larger goal is a philosophical one. I attempt to integrate the positions, arguments, and insights of Wang Chong into historical and contemporary debates on the topics he is interested in. To this end, what guides my focus here are the issues Wang discusses and the way he discusses them, how he argues, the methods he uses, and what arguments he presents. Using these arguments, we can build on concepts in different traditions. We can try to use Wang's positions and arguments to make sense of less clear positions and arguments in other traditions. Or we can use these to aid arguments or objections in these other traditions. Perhaps Wang even offers us insights that might help us develop new and more sophisticated positions on important philosophical topics in contemporary philosophy. So, although I am certainly here concerned with Wang Chong as historical figure in context, and with interpretation of his language, his ideas, and his style, I am primarily concerned with the philosophical value of his thought today, and the use of Wang's work as an experimental aid in doing philosophy, and for this reason I focus on a number of issues in the *Lunheng* that potentially have implications for contemporary philosophy. While I of course want to be sensitive to historical context, and do not aim to present anything historically inaccurate, my primary concern here is philosophical. What are Wang's views? How does he defend them? And how might such views be relevant to contemporary philosophical debates surrounding similar concepts and issues? These are the questions I aim to answer here.

It is for this reason that I title this book "the *philosophical* thought of Wang Chong". It is not lightly and without awareness of the loaded nature of this term that I use "philosophical" here. Certainly in ancient China there was no concept that could be thought to correspond to the contemporary (or even early Western) conception of *philosophy*. So to talk about the philosophical thought of Wang Chong is in essence to make a comparativist claim, and one that reveals my motivations here. Although Wang was not a "philosopher" in our contemporary sense, as there was no such thing in

Eastern Han China, any more than there were *ru* scholars in fifteenth-century England, we can read much of his thought as *philosophical*, in this comparative mode, in which we can see what he says and the arguments he gives as relevant to a whole host of philosophical issues and problems. Even while Wang would not have taken himself to be doing philosophy, much of what he did *was* philosophy, and his philosophical positions can be of great use in a number of ways in the comparative project as well as in the project of historical interpretation. Because I try to do all three of these things in this book (offer a historically sensitive interpretation of Wang Chong's work, place it in a comparative context with other philosophical traditions, and consider the possibilities and implications for modern debates appropriating Wang's thought), it might be thought that I necessarily fail in all of them. Any time one aims to accomplish multiple goals that may interest multiple audiences (here in sinology, history of philosophy, and contemporary philosophy), one runs the risk of alienating all of these audiences. So it is with some trepidation, but also with excitement, that I offer this work. In order to create larger audiences for works such as this, it is the responsibility of authors of works such as this to show why such projects are useful, and that they can ultimately be of great utility to those working in a number of different areas. In addition, works such as this one aim to create *new* areas of study, in which the boundaries of area studies, history, and philosophy are crossed in order to develop exciting new positions and ideas. I hope I've been successful here in doing this.

The objection sometimes given to this kind of project, that this is to misread the early Chinese thinkers or misconstrue their intentions, is not one that particularly bothers me. The reason for this is that I see a number of fairly major and important differences between the historical project and the philosophical project concerning early Chinese thinkers, as well as those from other philosophical traditions. The historical project might be seen as an attempt to read these thinkers in their contexts fully (or as fully as possible) in order to try to understand the cultural, philosophical, political, economic, or other causes of their views. While this is certainly a legitimate project, I take the philosophical project to be aimed more at understanding how historical thinkers conceived of and formed theories around certain concepts of perennial philosophical interest, in order to advance a history of the way these concepts were thought about (the historical-philosophical project) or to contribute to our understanding of these concepts and advance contemporary debates (the "philosophical

appropriational” project⁶). These two projects can and should develop alongside one another, although in any given work there will likely be more attention given to one than the other.

The way I conceive of the philosophical project here is comparative in nature. Beginning with basic philosophical concepts such as truth or knowledge, we can investigate the work of historical philosophers to see how they can contribute to our understanding of these concepts. This will of necessity ignore or neglect certain aspects of their thought, perhaps even *central* aspects of their thought. But there is no less justification for us to be able to parse and look at particular aspects of the thought of a given philosopher than there is for us to specialize in any other way.⁷

Historical philosophers in the “Western tradition” have not, at least for the past few hundred years, been subjected to the same suspicion and resistance as those in non-Western traditions by the Western academy. This is the case even though the thinkers of ancient Greece or medieval Italy are as distant from contemporary philosophy as are the ancient Chinese, Indian, or Mesoamerican philosophers. Historians of philosophy focus only on certain aspects of the thought of these historical philosophers that they see as continuous with a more objective and culturally unbounded philosophical tradition. We do the same thing with historical scientists. Given that “science” as we conceive of it today was not a distinct pursuit much before the

⁶I am indebted to Joel Kupperman (who advised my dissertation at UConn) for this phrase, which he used years ago in private conversation to describe his approach to Chinese philosophy. Although the term “appropriation” gets a bad rap and is often seen as negative, I think it is as important as it is inevitable to ensure a vital intellectual culture.

⁷James Maffie offers an excellent explanation of this understanding of the comparative-historical philosophical project, in his case concerning Aztec (or Nahuatl) philosophy, but one that is just as applicable to Chinese philosophy, in his recent book *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*. “What makes mine a *philosophical* project rather than a historical, religious, or anthropological examination and interpretation is the fact that I bring to bear upon our understanding of Aztec metaphysics the analytical tools, concepts, hermeneutical strategies, lessons, and insights of those areas of academic philosophy [analytic and Western]. Doing so, I hope, enables me to shed new light upon the Aztecs’ views about the nature, constitution, and structure of reality. This project *reconstructs* Aztec metaphysics in the sense of presenting and explicating the concepts and claims of Aztec metaphysics in a manner not necessarily identical with the Aztecs’ manner of presentation. Doing so inevitably involves highlighting and making explicit certain aspects of Aztec metaphysics at the expense of others. What’s more, many of the terms I employ—beginning with the concept of metaphysics itself—are alien to Aztec thought. This is unavoidable in any explication that involves interpreting and translating one way of thinking about things into an alien system of thinking about things.” Maffie, p. 3.

time of Newton (and arguably even in his time), to call anyone outside of the modern period a “scientist” or claiming them to have contributed to scientific thought could be seen as anachronistic and breaking outside of historical context. But while that may be so, certainly this is not an illegitimate project. Given what we conceive of as science, there were certainly people engaged in aspects of this before Newton’s time, even if they didn’t see what they were doing as “science”, or if it was only in part consistent with the contemporary standards of the pursuit. The history of science is in large part the history of prescience and science done outside of the context of science. Given our contemporary definition and understanding, however, we can project back into the past and see much of the work done by historical thinkers *as* science, even if they did not themselves conceive of it this way, because of the universality of our conception. Science is not bound to contemporary cultures, and using our definitions of it we can pick out and consider the scientific work of thinkers in the past. The work and thought of Johannes Kepler serves as a good example. Kepler’s role in the history of astronomy is largely seen as that of a scientific astronomer who formulated the laws of motion of planets, which Newton later systematized mathematically. But this view of Kepler takes him radically from his context. Kepler was engaged in, and saw himself as furthering, the same astrological and mystical projects as many others in his time were engaged in, including his attempt to account for the Aristotelian harmony of the spheres, and his understanding of the planets and their motions as involved intimately in human affairs.⁸ In historical context, it would be most proper to understand Kepler as astrologer rather than scientist. However, it is not an illegitimate project to read him as a scientist playing a role in the development of contemporary astronomy, however, since one aspect of his work and thought can be considered perfectly “scientific” and forms part of what we endorse within the scientific tradition. That is, we can profitably use our category of science and appropriate some of Kepler’s work as representative of this category, and consider the influence of that aspect of his thought in the construction of the category itself.

* * *

⁸ Patrick Boner discusses Kepler’s astrological orientation in *Kepler’s Cosmological Synthesis: Astrology, Mechanism, and the Soul* (2007).

In the chapters of this book I do not cover all of the chapters, ideas, and arguments of the massive *Lunheng* (which would require many volumes), but only those I deem to be devoted to philosophical subjects and involved in developing unique theories in response to other positions existing in the Eastern Han. If we see Wang Chong as a philosopher, he must be a philosopher *among* other things. Since I am considering the work of Wang Chong as philosopher, it is necessary to give an account of what I take to be sufficiently philosophical, as distinct from literary, scientific, or simply critical. The following discussion builds a conception of philosophy broad enough to include much of the thought of Wang Chong and other early Chinese thinkers, but narrow enough to avoid collapsing into something along the lines of “intellectual production”. This consideration is not ad hoc and led by a desire to include Wang and other early Chinese thinkers as philosophers, but instead I argue that a plausible conception of philosophy adequate to capture what most philosophers will consider as philosophy (and necessary to include work of most thinkers, East and West, we agree on as philosophical) will include much of the intellectual activity of Wang and many other early Chinese thinkers. This conception of philosophy still allows us to distinguish philosophy from religion, history, literature, science, and a number of other important but independent pursuits, however.

While there can be a distinction made between philosophy and these other intellectual pursuits, it is also the case that many people we might deem philosophers by this conception did not consider themselves philosophers and did not consider their philosophical work as independent from the rest of their thought. Thinkers in early China had no conception of “philosophy” as a pursuit, not just because of their lack of a term for such an enterprise, but because they didn’t think of what I will define here as philosophy and what we generally take as philosophy as an area distinct from the concerns of certain other areas of thought. I will not get deeply here into dealing with the challenge from those who hold that there was no philosophy in early China due to lack of a term to translate “philosophy” (which does not arrive in China until 哲學 “*zhe xue*” of the modern period, explicitly an attempt to render the Western term and concept of philosophy⁹), as this issue has been discussed by Bryan Van Norden (among others), who argues convincingly against what he calls the “lexical

⁹The first use of this term to translate “philosophy” is generally attributed to the Japanese philosopher Nishi Amane (1829–1897).

fallacy”. Lack of a specific term for a concept in a language does not entail lack of that concept in speakers of that language.¹⁰

The issue of philosophy and philosophical self-conception is a bit tougher, however. There are two ways in which we might consider the thought of Wang Chong as philosophical—one of them perhaps “provincial” and the other cosmopolitan. Both senses will serve my purposes here, however, and much of Wang’s thought can be considered philosophy on either conception. This is one of the things that makes Wang unique even among early Chinese philosophers and, I think, one of the reasons many Western scholars have paid so much attention to Wang’s thought, even given his relative lack of influence in Chinese intellectual history.

One difficulty of defining philosophy, even in the Western context, is the issue of its change over time. It is almost certainly the case that the ancient Greek conception of philosophy is very different from the project of contemporary analytic philosophy in the academy, for example, even though most professional philosophers today would trace back their “lineage” ultimately to the ancient Greeks.¹¹ Taking contemporary analytic philosophy as our starting point (not because I wish to dismiss continental philosophy and other conceptions of philosophy, but simply because I am more familiar with and was trained within the analytic tradition), we might give a definition of philosophy as centrally involving *conceptual analysis*. Although there are certainly deep metaphilosophical debates as to just how we ought to understand such analysis, we can say a few things about it unproblematically. Generally, we attempt to define and employ concepts in a theory in such a way that they manifest internal coherence, which can be determined by a priori means generally, and also that they are at least empirically acceptable insofar as they aren’t ruled out by empirical observation. Generally, philosophical issues and concepts are those that cannot really be determined one way or other through empirical observation and, for this reason, cannot fall within the domain of the sciences. Some philosophers (especially early in the analytic “movement”)¹² thought of philosophy as thus the beginning point of science, simply determining and clarifying the concepts that would then be used in empirically respectable

¹⁰ Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, 22.

¹¹ This accounts for why ancient Greek philosophy, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, remains one of the most basic requirements in any program of study in a philosophy department.

¹² Such as, famously (or perhaps infamously) W.V.O. Quine. This attitude has origins further back in history with the British Empiricists, particularly John Locke.

science. This “philosophy as handmaiden of the sciences” view persists in some corners of academic philosophy, but more commonly philosophy has come to be seen as an independent pursuit dealing with questions that presumably could never be decided by the methods of the empirical sciences because they are irreducibly conceptual.¹³ One conception of what philosophy does that has had adherents recently is the idea that philosophy clarifies the concepts of our ordinary language, and that using logical techniques we can come to speak in a clearer and more incisive way, independently of the so-called facts about the world.¹⁴

While these conceptions of the philosophical program are taken to be continuous with those of earlier Western philosophers, these ways of thinking about philosophy are very different from those found in ancient Greece and indeed much of the “Western tradition” until the modern day.¹⁵

According to Wang Chong himself in a number of passages across essays of the *Lunbeng*, his main goal in writing was to flesh out and advance a particular method for attaining *truths* (*shi* 實), or, as we can safely say, a *philosophical* method. Some may object here to my use of the term “philosophical” in this context, and my claim that Wang Chong constructed and advanced a philosophical method in anything like the way that philosophy has been understood in the Western tradition. Indeed, a number of authors have challenged the notion that anything resembling philosophy in the Western sense existed in China for much of its history.¹⁶ I disagree with this, and in particular with the view that Wang’s own thought cannot be called “philosophy”. Indeed, it is one of the main contentions of this book that in the thought of Wang Chong we see among the first *explicitly* philosophical projects in Chinese history in the sense of philosophy that resembles much of what is done in the contemporary Western tradition. On this

¹³The implosion of the logical positivist project showed that there are a number of conceptual issues that simply cannot be empirically solved, in part because observation is always itself “theory-laden”, most famously argued by Thomas Kuhn.

¹⁴This understanding of philosophy rose to a prominent place with the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein. See Scott Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century: Vol. 1*, and “The Changing Role of Language in Analytic Philosophy”, in Preston, ed. *Analytic Philosophy: An Interpretive History*.

¹⁵I use scare quotes here to flag the fact that the so-called Western tradition itself is a semi-fictional construct.

¹⁶See Heiner Roetz, “Philosophy in China? Notes on a Debate”, in *Extrême-Orient, Extrême Occident* 27 (2005), 53–55.

measure, Wang's work is more clearly "philosophical" than much philosophy in the history of the Western tradition.

Wang's philosophical project alienated many of his contemporaries, and was one of the reasons (one may suspect) that his work was relatively neglected until the modern period, in which it was "rediscovered" as part of the modernizing movements beginning in the late Qing. Wang saw himself doing, and in fact *was* doing, something very different than his contemporaries in his writings. I think there is good evidence to hold that Wang was one of the first thinkers in Chinese history we can refer to explicitly as a philosopher, and whose thought in many ways we can call philosophy. Not *everything* that Wang wrote was philosophy, of course, and in this book I focus on those parts of his *Lunheng* that are philosophical, but among other things (in addition to being a classical scholar, historian, and astronomer) Wang can be called a philosopher. It is in his capacity as philosopher that I, as a philosopher myself, am most interested in him, and it is as philosopher that I think he has most to contribute to contemporary debates.

In order to understand the way in which we might see Wang Chong as one of the first philosophers of Chinese history, it is important to have a sense of the intellectual projects of scholars throughout the earlier Han dynasty as well as in the more studied (by philosophers at least) and formative Warring States period. Wang's own philosophical project was, although new and innovative, not completely unprecedented, and was influenced by a combination of the attitudes of earlier thinkers in Warring States and Han thought. One major distinguishing feature of Wang Chong and his work, however, makes him stand out as clearly a philosopher in a familiar vein: the aim of his work, explicitly stated as the search for *shi* 實 (reality, truth) as opposed to *xu* 虛 (emptiness, falsity), especially insofar as it applies to teachings or *words* (言 *yan*). Where most other thinkers in ancient China were primarily concerned with social or personal thriving and wrote in order to facilitate this, Wang was concerned with theory and with understanding it as the basis of practical action.

Chad Hansen discusses what he calls the problem of the "defensive" strategy of interpreting Chinese philosophy in which various positions and concepts in ancient Chinese texts are offered as being similar to particular well-known Western positions and concepts, or offering us alternative positions on familiar debates in Western philosophy. While I agree that this strategy is a problematic one, Hansen's response to this is to insist on the fundamental difference between Chinese and Western philosophy

concerning theory of language and ideas.¹⁷ I think this is largely to miss the point concerning the debate surrounding whether Chinese thought is “philosophical”. This is a legitimate question, as much as that of asking whether there was theology, literary theory, or competitive sports in ancient China. Not just *any* intellectually developed theoretical system counts as philosophy. There are theories of physics, economics, political science, and history. None of these would count as philosophical simply because they are coherent, rigorous, credible, and even constructed a priori. In order to discern whether or not a particular kind of thought counts as philosophical, we have to have some base conception of what philosophy *is*. However, the net of philosophy cannot be so wide as to capture just *any* rigorous theoretical method, or we will have to end up concluding things as strange as that every field in contemporary academia is, in fact, philosophy.

Perhaps it is more difficult to define philosophy or to set boundaries for philosophy than it is for other areas of thought. It has to be possible to do so, however, or else “philosophy” becomes meaningless. One way of seeing philosophy is as a kind of “catch-all” area of thought into which falls whatever can’t be classified as belonging to some more determinate area of thought. If this is the case, however, it should be unproblematic to call ancient Chinese thought “philosophy”, insofar as it is in many ways very different from Western thought, and does not fall easily into any of the intellectual categories we have tended to distinguish in the West. I think this view of philosophy is an impoverished one, however. It is to hold that there is nothing in particular that philosophy *does*, that there is no specifically philosophical project, and that to call something “philosophical” is simply to make a claim about its lack of applicability to other fields, rather than its having a particular kind of positive project.

Almost any philosopher, contemporary or historical, will take himself or herself to have a positive conception of what it means to do philosophy, such that his or her work can be read as involved in a specific kind of project, with specific methods, rules, and, most importantly, aims. It is in this that I think philosophy ought to be defined—in that it consists in a certain set of related projects with shared aims and methods, however loosely defined these methods may be.

If we take relatively modest and broad view about what constitutes philosophy, one that I think most philosophers would agree to (at least

¹⁷Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, p. 26.

these can be seen as *necessary* conditions of something being philosophy), we can say that on the dominant conception of what philosophy is, it takes as its aim attainment of truth(s), however broadly conceived (we might have different views on what truth is, its place and role, and so on, but philosophers will generally take this concept as important and something their project aims to attain), uses largely a priori methods heavily reliant on logic (conceptual analysis is a dominant method in Western philosophy, but note that the methodological claim here is broader, such that it allows for conceptual analysis or other a priori methods), and is taken as *foundational* for other areas of human knowledge. This, I believe, supplies us with a *thin* conception of the concept of philosophy, that can be (and is) filled out in different ways in different traditions. But it gives us at least enough to be able to determine, within traditions, what constitutes philosophy and what does not. And this is something we can bring to the Chinese tradition as well.

It turns out that, if we use this relatively modest conception of philosophy, there is plenty of philosophy going on in ancient China. But even if we “up the ante” and take a more Western-based view of philosophy taking the central method to be one of conceptual analysis and debate, we *still* can find philosophy in ancient China, even though this whittles down the number of thinkers who can be said to have been engaged in philosophy. One of the thinkers who survives almost no matter how far we come toward the Western conception of philosophy is Wang Chong. In a sense, Wang is the most “Western” of the philosophers of the ancient period (perhaps with the exception of the later Mohists), in that his aims and methods align with those of many philosophers of the Western tradition.

A couple of objections might arise to this line of thinking. First, how can we treat a concept that either did not exist or was not a major concern in early China as a major category in our analysis of a thinker like Wang Chong? Isn't this an anachronism at best, and a blatant misrepresentation of the thought of Wang and other early Chinese thinkers at worst? I think the best answer to this objection is simply to point out that our concern with historical thinkers is *always* guided by concepts and concerns that were not those of the figures we study. In our interpretation of texts, we are guided by concerns that are uniquely ours. How we read a text is necessarily shaped by these considerations. Even in rendering the thought of Wang Chong or another early Chinese thinker into English is to distance ourselves from his concerns as he understood them, and to present his thought outside of its “context”. We can never access a “pure”

understanding of any early Chinese thinker using our concepts and our language, because the fact always remains that these thinkers themselves did not use these concepts and this language. The most we could ever do to approach most closely the thought of Wang Chong would be simply to repeat his words, using his language, in exactly the way he used them.¹⁸ When we give an economic explanation for the actions of an emperor or a scholar who had no idea of the concepts of modern economic theory or even thought himself of his actions in anything like these terms, we often defend this methodology by claiming (or arguing) that these theories *really* explain the actions or thoughts of the figure in question, whether he realized it or not. Yet many remain unwilling to do this for the case of philosophy. We have no qualms about applying the conceptual tools of economic materialism to ancient Chinese thought, but resist the application of philosophy. I suspect some of the reason for this is the implicit mistrust of the concepts and categories of philosophy as legitimate aspects of human experience and the assumption that economic materialism is legitimately explanatory and “real” in a way philosophy is not. If the concepts and methods of economic materialism get at something that is actually there in human nature or action or thought, regardless of whether early Chinese thinkers conceptualized it as such, it is a legitimate enterprise to use these concepts and methods to interpret early Chinese thinkers. If the concepts and methods of philosophy are parochial, mind and culturally dependent, subjective, and private, however, then they cannot be used outside of their narrow context. I think such views are wrong about both philosophy and economic materialism.

Second, we might ask, why concern oneself with investigating an ancient Chinese thinker like Wang Chong in light of Western philosophy (ancient or contemporary)? What is the point? Why not aim to simply understand Wang Chong’s thought in its own historical and intellectual context, reading his *Lunheng* against the background of other Han dynasty and earlier texts that he would have read, the thinkers he would have actually engaged with, and the concepts and arguments he would have been working with? There is something to this response, in that we ought to be careful to avoid taking the similarity of thinkers like Wang Chong to certain strains of Western philosophy as doing more work than it possibly can. Also, we must resist the urge to completely transform thinkers like Wang

¹⁸ Perhaps this was the reason for the closeness of the “explanations” of the commentaries in the He Yan *Lunyu jijie* collection to the *Analects* itself.

into Western philosophers. Although Wang may share more similarities with Western philosophers than the vast majority of other known thinkers in the ancient Chinese world, this neither shows that he can be completely integrated into the mold of Western philosophy nor that we can simply read him as presenting views and arguments on topics and debates of interest in the Western tradition. While Wang's thought may look more familiar to philosophers in the Western tradition than that of most other ancient Chinese thinkers, Wang's work was still engaged with specifically Han debates, and this must be kept in mind as we engage with and interpret Wang's work. In some ways, understanding Wang is *complicated* by the stark similarities between his thought and much of Western philosophy, because we have to constantly resist the tendency to use the same interpretive schemes to understand Wang as we do to understand historical Western philosophers such as the ancient Greeks.¹⁹

At the same time, reading Wang in an explicitly philosophical way, through the lenses of a more Western-based conception of philosophy, can be useful in a number of ways. Wang acquits himself pretty well, whether we use the interpretive schemes of Chinese or of Western thought. Chad Hansen has expressed the worry that, when read using Western concepts, Chinese thinkers become pale imitations of better-known and more rigorous Western philosophers. I'm not sure why this should be the case, however, unless Chinese thinkers are indeed weaker and offer us less interesting positions on these issues, in which case there is no point in investigating their views in this area or style of philosophy (even while they may be worthy of study in *different* philosophical areas or outside of philosophy altogether). Some Chinese thinkers will indeed suffer in such comparison, just as some Western philosophers will look impoverished and inadequate when compared with Chinese thinkers on issues of political harmony and self-cultivation.

The situation with Wang Chong, however, is different. In Wang, we have an ancient Chinese philosophical thinker whose work is in the strain of and stands up in light of anything in ancient Western thought. Because of this, contemporary philosophers have potentially much more to gain (to assist their own current projects at least) from a study of Wang Chong

¹⁹A trap, I think, into which a number of very capable comparative philosophers have occasionally fallen with respect to the similarities between Confucius and Aristotle. May Sim, Jiyuan Yu, and so on. In the case of Sim and Yu, however, this may be due in part to the fact that they are primarily Aristotle scholars.

than they do from ancient Chinese thinkers who are “further afield” from the methods and interests of contemporary philosophy.²⁰ Of course, there are a couple of issues here. There are numerous reasons contemporary philosophers ought to study and understand ancient Chinese philosophy (if I had my way, ancient Chinese philosophy would be an area of the history of philosophy deemed as necessary to a proper philosophical education as classical Greek philosophy), but two of them stand out here.

First, much of ancient Chinese philosophy can serve as a *counterbalance* to specifically Western conceptions of philosophy and can help to give us a sense of the different ways philosophy might develop and how we might think of our own projects in radically different ways, in order to diffuse, rather than solve, intractable philosophical problems. Most philosophical progress (just like progress in the sciences) has happened this way—difficult problems are not generally solved using the methods within which those problems arose, but rather we often find that a critical rethinking of the foundations of our projects, a Kuhnian “paradigm shift”, shows us how our conceptualizations and methods created the problem and how new ways of thinking about our projects undermines the basis on which the problems generate. But paradigm shifts cannot happen without the availability of new ways of thinking, without the ability to reimagine our projects and goals. It is no mystery why cultural renaissances seem to coincide with the introduction of new discoveries, whether scientific or cultural. In this vein we can see the usefulness of the kind of Chinese philosophy that presents an alternative to dominant Western conceptions of philosophy. Thinkers such as the early Confucians, Zhuangzi and other Daoists, and the Han correlative philosophers fall under this category. These philosophers would surely appear inadequate in comparison to many Western philosophers if we investigate them through the lenses of philosophy as conceptual analysis and debate, but an investigation of what they do better than Western philosophers can help to dislodge the prevalent notion in the West that what philosophy is (or at least what philosophy is *at its best*) consists of conceptual and linguistic analysis.

²⁰This is not to say, of course, that studying and engaging with very different thinkers with very different concerns and views from our own is not valuable. In my view this task is even more important than that of engaging with thinkers from whom we can gain additional tools for our current projects. To encounter difference helps us to question, rethink, and adapt our own projects.

A second reason for contemporary philosophers to understand ancient Chinese thinkers such as Wang Chong is insofar as some of these philosophers *are* engaged in projects similar to those of Western philosophers, but offer sometimes very different positions and different ways of developing those projects. Ancient Chinese thought is no more monolithic and single-minded than is Western thought. While there are Chinese philosophers engaged in very different projects than, say, contemporary analytic philosophers, there are others who are engaged in projects startlingly similar to those of contemporary analytic philosophers. Perhaps the most similar of these ancient Chinese thinkers is Wang Chong. In studying Wang's work then, we open up new avenues of thought and discover new possibilities for answering the outstanding questions of contemporary philosophical discourse. While Wang Chong cannot be profitably seen as engaging in the exact same projects or being concerned with the exact same questions that many contemporary Westerners are, we can take his positions and arguments as relevant and applicable to contemporary debates. We will see that Wang's positions on truth, naturalism, and normativity, for example (among others), show us unique positions that might be taken up and defended as live options in contemporary debates. In organizing the themes of the rest of the book, I have concentrated on those aspects of Wang Chong's work *most* relevant to contemporary philosophers. Because of this, I've neglected discussion of other very interesting aspects of Wang Chong's thought, such as his physical, medical, and (to some extent) astronomical positions. This book, however, does not aim to be an exhaustive interpretation of Wang Chong's work as a whole, but to be an account of his *philosophical* work.

METHODOLOGIES OF PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY, AND COMPARATIVE THOUGHT

Some readers of this book will find relatively unproblematic the approach I am taking to the work of Wang Chong, situated in a comparative and appropriative context. A certain kind of philosopher, the "philosophical appropriatist", who takes the study of historical philosophers as useful for the insights we might gain into live philosophical problems, will likely have the least issues with what I am doing in this book. However, this is one of those projects in which, in the attempt to do something new and innovative combining the interests of multiple fields, one ends up alienating