

WANG CHONG'S FATALISM

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Abstract

Although Wang Chong has often been categorized as a kind of fatalist, many scholars maintain that his fatalism does not include one's moral autonomy, as he argues that one's inborn moral tendencies can be changed through education. He even acknowledges that a person can live a different life from what one's *ming* must have dictated. But in this article, I show that even when Wang seems to claim that personal effort is important in life, he soon claims that even the abilities to make efforts or to strive to be a better person are more or less decided at birth. And even when he claims that people born with evil nature can be guided to goodness, nowhere does he suggest that to be good or evil is a matter of our choice. And if there is an occasion where one does not live up to what one's *ming* has predetermined, it is only because there was another *ming*, one that is more powerful than that of an individual, that interfered with the realization of one's original *ming*, not because that one's original *ming* has changed. In the end, I argue that even though Wang Chong may not be a fatalist in its fullest sense, since fatalism means that *every event* is necessitated, he comes very close to being one, as he sees that in so many instances of our lives, we are not free to act in any other way than in the way that *ming* has prearranged.

Introduction

That Wang Chong held fatalistic views about life is widely accepted, and many scholars have categorized him as a type of fatalist.¹ The grounds for such categorization are found in chapters like “Ming yi” 命義 (the Meaning of *ming*) of the *Lun heng* 論衡 (The Balance of Discourses),²

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1. See, for example, Jin Chunfeng 金春峰, *Handai sixiang shi* 漢代思想史 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue, 1987), 499–505; Shao Yiping 邵毅平, *Lun heng yanjiu* 論衡研究 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue, 2009), 292–326; Li Yongda 李詠達, “Wang Chong yu Wang Fu tianren guanxulun zhi bijiao-yi ‘Lun heng guxiangpian’ ji ‘Qianfulun xiangliepian’ wei kaocha zhongxin” 王充與王符天人關係論之比較—以《論衡·骨相篇》及《潛夫論·相列篇》為考察中心, *Zongjiao zhexue* 宗教哲學, no. 74 (December 1, 2015), 159–64.

2. Michael Nylan claims that the *Lun heng* cannot be the work of a single author since it has too many internal contradictions (although she does not specify what the contradictions are). See Michael Nylan, “Academic Silos, or ‘What I Wish Philosophers Knew about Early

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which include numerous arguments that many aspects of our lives are decided at (or before) birth. For example, the *Lun heng* says:

凡人受命，在父母施氣之時，已得吉凶矣。³

As a rule, a person receives one's *ming* when one's parents are disseminating their *qi*, and one's fortune and misfortune are already decided.

On the basis of such passages, Marc Kalinowski summarizes Wang Chong's view of fate as follows: "Fate is conferred to men at birth by heaven, and is instilled in them at the moment when they receive their vital breath, their *qi*. It cannot be changed or renewed in the course of its existence."⁴

This essay follows and supports this summary closely, though diverging from Kalinowski's analysis at points, and demonstrates that Wang's thought closely approaches Western philosophical conceptions of fatalism. Mark Bernstein has defined these conceptions as arguing that: "the thesis that whatever happens must happen ... [And according to this thesis,] Our belief that there are alternative courses of action available to our decisions and choices is mistaken. As a result, there is no such thing as (libertarian) free will."⁵

Recently, Michael Nylan has pointed out how the concept of *ming* in early China was fundamentally different from that of "fate" in English, as "all or nearly all *ming* can be altered by judicious, timely action; the question is when and how."⁶ Broadly speaking, Nylan is correct,⁷ but for

History in China," in *Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies*, ed. Sor-hoon Tan (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 94. However, like many other scholars, I accept the *Lun heng* as an authentic work of Wang Chong. For other opinions, see Timoteus Pokora and Michael Loewe, "Lun heng" 論衡, in *Early Chinese Texts: a Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Michael Loewe (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China, 1993), 309–10; Nicolas Zufferey, *Wang Chong (27–97?): Connaissance, politique et vérité en Chine ancienne* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1995), 92–93; Alexis McLeod, *The Philosophical Thought of Wang Chong* (Cham: Springer, 2018), 39–43. Despite the contradictions, there are various ways to defend the single authorship of the *Lun heng*, one of which I will discuss extensively in this article. For a more traditional explanation of other contradictions, see the comment on *Lun heng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1990), 693 ("Luan lung" 亂龍).

3. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 50 ("Ming yi").

4. Marc Kalinowski, *Balance des discours: Destin, providence et divination* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2011), LXXXIII.

5. Mark Bernstein, "Fatalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 65. Words within brackets are my addition.

6. Nylan, "Academic Silos," 99. Mark Csikszentmihalyi has made a similar point. See his "Allotment and Death in Early China," in *Mortality in Traditional Chinese Thought*, ed. Amy Olberding and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press., 2011), 185–90.

7. On the alterability of *ming* in early China, see Yunwoo Song, "The Emergence of the Notion of Predetermined Fate in Early China," *Dao* 18.4 (2019), 514–16.

Wang Chong at least, *ming* can be safely translated as fate; his view of *ming* is fatalistic, because Wang does not believe that *ming* can change. As a matter of fact, he comes very close to arguing that, just as in the Western fatalist view, "we lack the power (capability, ability) to perform any actions other than the ones that we do, in fact, perform."⁸ His theory of human nature is a proof that China also had a theory that questioned individuals' moral autonomy.⁹

Admittedly, there are places within the *Lun heng*, where Wang Chong seems to accept cases of people living different lives from the dictates of their *ming*. For example, he does not believe that the hundreds of thousands of people who died at the battle of Changping 長平 (where the Qin general Bai Qi 白起 defeated the Zhao 趙 army in 260 B.C.E.) all had the same *ming*.¹⁰ Also, regarding individuals' moral tendencies, Wang claims in "Shuai xing" 率性 (Guiding human nature) that people born with evil natures can be guided to goodness through education,¹¹ while simultaneously arguing in "Ben xing" 本性 (Original human nature), that those who are born extremely good or evil cannot be made otherwise.¹² These seeming contradictions have served as grounds to argue that Wang Chong's fatalism does not include a challenge to one's moral autonomy. For example, Nicolas Zufferey explains the contradiction between "Ben xing" and "Shuai xing" as a change in Wang Chong's position in the course of his life.¹³ Many others likewise maintain that, despite what is said in "Ben xing," Wang is not a moral determinist since he accepts possibilities of moral transformation.¹⁴ Furthermore, Kalinowski, who summarizes Wang Chong's position

8. Bernstein, "Fatalism," 65.

9. This contradicts Ning Chen's argument that "Never in ancient China is the idea established that Fate (in the sense of a blind force) can exercise its control over all aspects of man's life. To be moral or evil, for instance, is exclusively man's own choice, the freedom of man's moral will is never called into question." Ning Chen, "Confucius' View of Fate (Ming)," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 24.3 (1997), 330.

10. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 44 ("Ming yi").

11. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 68 ("Shuai xing").

12. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 137 ("Ben xing").

13. Zufferey, *Wang Chong*, 317.

14. E.g. Chen Zhengxiong 陳正雄, *Wang Chong xueshu sixiang shuping* 王充學術思想述評 (Taipei: Wenjin, 1987), 114–16; Shao Yiping, *Lun heng yanjiu*, 295–97. Even Alexus McLeod, who presents Wang Chong as having "a commitment to a seemingly hard determinist," could belong to this group. McLeod, *The Philosophical Thought of Wang Chong*, 207. He suggests that when Wang was making fatalistic claims in chapters like "Zhi qi" 治期 (Periods of government), "Perhaps Wang has overstepped here ... such that he's forced himself into a corner and contradicts his own views about the efficacy of moral education elsewhere" (*ibid.*, 227).

that fate is conferred at birth and “cannot be changed or renewed in the course of its existence,”¹⁵ simultaneously claims that:

At the level of individual existences, this amoralism of destiny does not lead to an impasse, to a form of *argos logos* inciting to laziness and rejection of any voluntary action. On the contrary, it allows philosophy to divert man from thirst for honors and profit to reorient him to an ethics of detachment, to an ideal of life which is at the heart of Confucian teaching.¹⁶

“Diverting man from thirst for honors and profit to reorient him to an ethics of detachment” may indeed be the heart of Confucian teaching as Kaliwowski observes. The more authoritative Confucian texts like the *Lun yu* or the *Mengzi* all talk about *ming* as a kind of uncontrollable force acting on human lives, and Edward Slingerland explains that

The concept of *ming* as being something outside human control is not a fatalistic excuse for retiring to a life of ritual, but rather an observation designed to redirect the student’s attention from the pursuit of external goals (official position, etc.) toward the project of self-cultivation.¹⁷

But while Slingerland’s analysis is valid for the *Lun yu* and the *Mengzi*, the same cannot be said about Wang Chong’s thought. As a whole, Wang’s philosophy is decidedly more fatalistic.

What I will show in this essay is that even when Wang seems to claim that personal effort is important in life, he soon claims that even the initiative to become a better person is more or less decided at birth. And even when he claims that people born with an evil nature can be guided to goodness, nowhere does he suggest that being good or evil is a choice. And if there is an occasion where one does not live up to what one’s *ming* has predetermined, it is only because there was another *ming*, one that is more powerful than that of an individual, that interfered with one’s original *ming*, not because the original *ming* was changed.

In the end, however, I would hesitate to label Wang Chong as a fatalist, as fatalism in the strict sense means that *every event* is necessitated. But Wang’s view comes very close. According to his conception of *ming*, in

15. Kalinowski, *Balance des discours*, LXXXIII.

16. Kalinowski, *Balance des discours*, LXXXVI. Yoshida Teruko has also maintained a basically similar interpretation of Wang Chong’s view of fate. Yoshida Teruko 吉田照子, “Ō Jū no seisetsu —sei to mei to jō to ki to” 王充の性説—性と命と情と氣と, *Tetsugaku* 哲学, no. 40 (1988), 219–20.

17. Edward Slingerland, “The Conception of Ming in Early Confucian Thought,” *Philosophy East and West* 46.4 (1996), 576–77. Paul Goldin presents a similar interpretation of *ming* in the *Mengzi*. See Paul R. Goldin, *Confucianism* (London: Routledge, 2014), 55.

many instances of our lives we are not free to act in any other way than that which *ming* has prearranged.

The Background of Wang Chong's Fatalism and the Theory of Three Kinds of Ming

By Han times (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), the notion of predetermined fate undoubtedly existed in China. We see its evidence in philosophical discussions such as the “Feiming” 非命 chapter of the *Mozi*, as well as in various narratives of figures who were faced with inevitable misfortune.¹⁸ The widely held belief at the time seems to be that there were three kinds of *ming*, which Wang explains as follows:

傳曰：「說命有三：一曰正命，二曰隨命，三曰遭命。」正命、謂本稟之自得吉也。性然骨善，故不假操行以求福而吉自至，故曰正命。隨命者、戮力操行而吉福至，縱情施欲而凶禍到，故曰隨命。遭命者、行善得惡，非所冀望，逢遭於外而得凶禍，故曰遭命。¹⁹

It is said that there are three ways to explain one's *ming*: correct *ming* (*zheng ming*), ensuing *ming* (*sui ming*), and encountered *ming* (*zao ming*). Correct *ming* refers to the naturally acquired auspiciousness through the original endowments. One's physique is good by nature, so even if one does not seek fortunes by through one's deeds, fortune arrive on its own. Thus, it is called correct *ming*. Those who bear ensuing *ming* face fortune when they are earnest in their deeds but misfortune arrives when they follow their emotions and desires without restraint. Thus, it is called ensuing *ming*. Those who bear encountered *ming* get bad [results] despite good deeds. They encounter what they did not hoped for in the world and face misfortune and calamity. Thus, it is called encountered *ming*.

If we are to trace the origin of this thought that human lives can be categorized into three kinds *ming*, Cho-yun Hsu has pointed out that the theory of the three kinds of *ming* is remarkably similar to Lu Jia's 陸賈 (d. 170 B.C.E.) description of the fate of trees:²⁰

夫榘杗豫章、天下之名木，生於深山之中，產於溪谷之傍，立則為大山衆木之宗，仆則為萬世之用 … 商賈所不至，工匠所不窺，知者所不

18. For a collection of tales of predetermination in the Han dynasty, see Cho-yun Hsu, “The Concept of Predetermination and Fate in the Han,” *Early China* 1 (1975), 51–56.

19. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 49–50 (“Ming yi”).

20. Hsu, “The Concept of Predetermination and Fate in the Han,” 54.

見，見者所不知，功棄而德亡，腐朽而枯傷，轉於百仞之壑，惕然而獨僵，當斯之時，不如道傍之枯楊。> 累累詰屈，委曲不同，然生於大都之廣地，近於大匠之名工，則材器制斷，規矩度量，堅者補朽，短者續長。… 彼則槁枯而遠棄，此則為宗廟之瑚璉者，通與不通也。人亦猶此。²¹

Cedars and camphor trees are world-famous trees. ... [But when they grow in inaccessible places] which merchants cannot reach and carpenters cannot see, those who [know their value] do not get to see them, and those who see them do not know [their value]. Thus, their merit and value are lost, and they rot and wither away. They roll down high valleys or silently fall on their own. At this point, they are inferior to dried willows on roadsides. Their roots and branches are all bent and intertwined, and they are all differently shaped. But if they grow in large fields of major cities and are close to the masterly work of great carpenters, they are trimmed and measured with tools. [The carpenters] fill in the rotted spots [of the solid ones] and join [the shorter ones] to make them longer.... [The reason why] some [trees] wither away, abandoned in remote places, while others are made into sacrificial vessels used in ancestral shrines is the difference in accessibility. This is the same for human beings.

In this passage, Lu Jia presents three cases of tree fates: excellent trees found in places accessible by merchants and carpenters, excellent trees found in inaccessible places, and inferior trees found on roadsides. It is noteworthy that, as in the description of the three kinds of *ming*, the fate of trees is decided at the very beginning of their existence. As soon as the seeds of these great trees sprouted in inaccessible places, they were already too far from a carpenter's lathe.

We cannot determine from this analogy whether Lu Jia was a fatalist like Wang Chong. The point of this treatise is that rulers must look for talented individuals who might be withering away because they remain unrecognized. Nevertheless, the remarkable resemblance between his analogy of trees and the theory of three kinds of *ming* Wang describes suggests a general awareness in Han society that worldly success depends on the circumstances that one is born into.²²

One text dated about a century earlier than Lu Jia shows a similar idea. A manuscript titled "Qionгда yi shi" 窮達以時 (Time as the cause

21. *Xinyu jiaozhu* 新語校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1986), 101–2 ("Zi zhi" 資質).

22. Wang Chong also uses the analogy of trees to explain fate in *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 42 ("Xing ou" 幸偶).

of success and poverty) discovered in an early third century B.C.E. tomb in Guodian 郭店, Jingmen 荊門, Hubei 湖北 province, argues as follows:²³

有天有人，天人有分。察天人之分，而知所行矣。有其人，無其世，雖賢弗行矣。苟有其世，何難之有哉？舜耕於歷山，陶澁於河澗，立而焉天子，遇堯也… 遇不遇，天也… 窮達以時。²⁴

There is [that which is controlled by] Heaven, and there is [that which is within the power of] man, and each has its separate lot. Once one has examined the division between Heaven and man, one will know how to act. With the right person, but without the right age, even though he be worthy he will be unable to act. If given the right age, however, what difficulties would there be? Shun plowed in the fields of Mt. Li and molded pottery on the banks of the Yellow River, and yet he [eventually] took the throne as Son of Heaven—this is because he encountered [the Sovereign] Yao... Whether or not [all the aforementioned men] encountered [an appreciative lord] was [a matter controlled by] Heaven.... Poverty and success is a matter of timing.²⁵

The manuscript goes on to list more examples of famous figures in Chinese history who had suffered through hardships until they finally met someone who appreciated their worthiness. As with Lu Jia's analogy of trees, this manuscript emphasizes two factors that affect one's life: worthiness and uncontrollable environmental circumstances. Worthiness alone does not guarantee success in the world; it has to be paired with the right opportunities to display one's talent.²⁶

Of course, even before the appearance of "Qionгда yi shi," Chinese people must have been long aware of the weak correlation between an individual's worthiness and opportunities. Complaints about seemingly unjust suffering are already visible in the *Shi jing*.²⁷ The uniqueness

23. On the basis of archaeological evidence, Asano Yūichi gives the late fourth century B.C.E. as *terminus ante quem* for "Qionгда yi shi." See Asano Yūichi 淺野裕一, "Kakuten Sokan 'Kyūtatsu i ji' no 'ten jin no bun' ni tsuite" 郭店楚簡『窮達以時』の「天人之分」について, *Shūkan tōyōgaku* 集刊東洋学, no. 83 (May 2000), 22–24.

24. Li Ling 李零, *Guodian Chujian jiaoduji* 郭店楚簡校讀記 (Beijing: Zhonghuo renmin daxue, 2007), 111–12.

25. This translation is from Scott B. Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian: A Study & Complete Translation* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012), 453–64.

26. Cf. Asano Yūichi, "Kakuten Sokan 'Kyūtatsu i ji' no 'ten jin no bun' ni tsuite," 27–32. Asano argues that "Qionгда yi shi" was written in order to explain Confucius' political failure.

27. E.g. *Mao shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue, 2000), 873–82 ("Xiao bian" 小弁); 1383–1401 ("Sang rou" 桑柔). Cf. Ning Chen, "The Genesis of the Concept of Blind Fate in Ancient China," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25.1 (1997), 154–59.

of “Qiongda yi shi,” however, is that it explains this phenomenon naturalistically. In the claim that a worthy person living in the right age will have no difficulties, we can see that the unjustifiable sufferings of worthy people are attributed to “the age” *shi* 世, which represents the objective conditions of the time.

Nevertheless, the idea reflected in “Qiongda yi shi” is still different from that seen in Lu Jia’s analogy of trees. “Qiongda yi shi” never implies a difference among individuals in their chances of encountering opportunities. All it says is that success is dependent upon external factors as well as one’s abilities. In contrast, Lu Jia clearly acknowledges that some people are naturally better positioned to be recognized than others, even if they may be living in the same era. By the first century C.E., the idea that different people have different chances of success became even more solidified, to the point that there were terms to describe different kinds of fate.

The theory of the three kinds of *ming*, however, need not necessarily entail irreversible predetermination. Wang Chong’s own writing suggests that even during his time there were people who argued that one’s inborn *ming* can be changed through effort:

若顏淵、伯牛之徒，如何遭凶？顏淵、伯牛，行善者也，當得隨命，福祐隨至，何故遭凶？… 行善當得隨命之福，乃觸遭命之禍，何哉？言隨命則無遭命，言遭命則無隨命，儒者三命之說，竟何所定？²⁸

Why did people like Yan Yuan or Boniu (who are disciples of Confucius) encounter misfortune? Yan Yuan and Boniu were people who practiced goodness. They should have obtained ensuing *ming*, and fortune [should have] followed [their deeds]. Why is that they encountered misfortune? ... By practicing goodness, one should obtain the fortune of ensuing *ming*, but why is it that some people face the misfortune of encountered *ming*? If one speaks of ensuing *ming*, there is no encountered *ming*, and if one speaks of encountered *ming*, there is no ensuing *ming*. Then what is the ultimate ground on which the Confucians’ three-*ming* theory is established?²⁹

28. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 51–52 (“Ming yi”).

29. Despite arguments that the term *ru* 儒 should not be translated as “Confucian,” I agree with scholars like Paul R. Goldin, John S. Major, and Sarah A. Queen in that “Confucian” is still an acceptable translation of the word, especially in comparison with other alternatives proposed such as “classicist” or even *ru* untranslated. See Goldin, *Confucianism*, 4–6; Sarah A. Queen and John S. Major, eds., *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 12–13. For the opposite arguments, see Michael Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu: a “Confucian” Heritage and the*

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Note that Wang Chong is not denying the possibility of cases that may be described as encountered *ming* or ensuing *ming*. There are obviously people who seem to be rewarded for their deeds and others who seem to be undeservingly punished in spite of their deeds. His point is that “practicing goodness” has nothing to do with obtaining fortune. If that were the case, Yan Yuan would have had ensuing *ming*, but Yan was never rewarded for his deeds. That is because Yan Yuan was born with encountered *ming*.

On the basis of this belief, Wang provides his own definitions of the three kinds of *ming*, which is much simpler than that which he heard from others.

正命者、至百而死。隨命者、五十而死。遭命者、初稟氣時遭凶惡也，謂妊娠之時遭得惡[物]也，或遭雷雨之變，長大夭死。³⁰

Those who have correct *ming* live up to a hundred years, and those who have ensuing *ming* live [only] up to fifty and die. Those who have encountered *ming* are those who have encountered evil when they first received their *qi*, [i.e. during birth]. This means that [their] mothers encountered evil things during pregnancy, such as the changes encountered after a thunderstorm. [These babies] will meet an early death after attaining adulthood.

This simplistic explanation of the three kinds of *ming* makes two points clear about his understanding of *ming*: a person's *ming* is fixed before birth, and this *ming* is completely irrelevant to one's conduct in life. According to this passage, we may even surmise that Yan Yuan's mother encountered some disastrous events while pregnant with Yan Yuan. But this seemingly ridiculous position begins to look more sensible when the scope of *ming* is strictly limited to one's lifespan, as defined by Wang Chong.

死生者，無象在天，以性為主。稟得堅彊之性，則氣渥厚而體堅彊，堅彊則壽命長，壽命長則不夭死。稟性軟弱者，氣少泊而性(體)羸窳，羸窳則壽命短，短則蚤死。故言「有命」，命則性也。³¹

There are no portents for life and death in Heaven. They are subject to one's nature. The *qi* of those who are endowed with a hard and strong nature is thick, and their bodies are hard and strong. If [their bodies are] hard and strong, their lifespan is long, and they will not die early.

“*Chunqiu fanlu*” (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 1–6; Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 6–7.

30. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 52–53 (“Ming yi”).

31. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 46–47. This theory is also expounded in the “Qi shou” 氣壽 chapter.

The *qi* of those who are endowed with a soft and weak nature is thin, and their bodies are feeble and inferior. If [their bodies are] feeble and inferior, their lifespan is short, and they will die early. Therefore, it is said that “there is *ming* [in life and death].” (*Lun yu* 12:5) *Ming* refers to one’s nature.

Wang argues here that those who are born with a thick *qi* are naturally healthier and thus able to live a long life, while those who are born with thin *qi* are naturally weak and can only live a short life. This is not an unreasonable claim. There really are children who are born healthier than others, while some are born with genetic disorders that lead to premature death. Rather than referring to thick and thin *qi*, modern scientists refer to a person’s DNA.

However, if we go back to the previous passage, Wang Chong seems to argue that what is decided at birth is not just one’s physical constitution, but also whether one will face death or misfortune incidentally. Correct *ming* and ensuing *ming* refer to the lives of the people who die naturally at the age predetermined by one’s *qi* at birth. But there are also people who die at an early age even though they were born with healthy bodies. These are people with encountered *ming*. Thus, Wang Chong’s explanation of the three kinds of *ming* covers all possible human lives. Every human being is born with one of these three kinds of *ming*, and one’s *ming* dictates not just one’s natural tendencies but also encountering of chances and accidents during one’s life. And we will see that the scope of *ming* for Wang Chong is by no means limited to one’s lifespan. Things like wealth, and nobility are all controlled by one’s *ming*.

Ming Beyond Wealth and Nobility

The belief that there is *ming* for things like wealth, nobility, and longevity is by no means Wang’s original idea. What is unique in his thought is that he finds *ming* to be responsible even for opportunities for success and events that threaten one’s status.

凡人遇偶及遭累害，皆由命也。有死生壽夭之命，亦有貴賤貧富之命。自王公逮庶人，聖賢及下愚，凡有首目之類，含血之屬，莫不有命。命當貧賤，雖富貴之，猶涉禍患，[失其富貴]矣；命當富貴，雖貧賤之，猶逢福善，[離其貧賤]矣。故命貴從賤地自達，命賤從富位自危。³²

As a rule, people’s meeting chances [of success] or encountering continuous disasters are all due to *ming*. There is *ming* that [governs] one’s longevity, but there is also *ming* that [governs] one’s nobility and

32. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 20 (“*Ming lu*” 命祿).

wealth. From king and dukes to commoners, from sages and worthies to ignorant people, all those who have a head and [a pair of] eyes, all those that have blood [in their veins], have *ming*. If one's *ming* is to be poor and humble, then even if [someone] were to make that person rich and noble, that person would be involved in disasters and will lose that wealth and nobility. [Likewise,] if one's *ming* is to be wealthy and noble, even if [someone] were to make that person poor and humble, that person would find luck and depart from that poverty and humbleness. Therefore, when one's *ming* is to be noble, one will naturally rise from humble grounds, and when one's *ming* is to be humble, one will naturally face peril in a wealthy status.

Here, we see a part of Wang Chong's fundamentally fatalistic attitude. Wang Chong argues that wealth and nobility are independent of one's qualities or efforts. If one's *ming* is to be poor and humble, even if someone were to give that person money and honor, these will eventually slip away. Correspondingly, those who have *ming* to be wealthy will find wealth regardless of their circumstances.

Does this imply that people with blissful *ming* can be lazy yet still attain wealth and nobility? He does argue along that line:

天命難知，人不耐審，雖有厚命，猶不自信，故必求之也。如自知，雖逃富避貴，終不得離。³³

One's *ming* given by Heaven is difficult to understand, and human beings cannot investigate it in detail. [Hence] even if one has *ming* to be rich, one cannot trust oneself [with that *ming*]. Thus, one must seek [fortune]. If one truly knows that [one has blissful *ming*], even if one tries to escape from wealth and nobility, they will never leave him/her.

The last sentence of this passage indicates that, in Wang Chong's belief, even lazy people can attain wealth if their destiny is to be rich. In fact, Wang Chong goes a step further and claims that even if one voluntarily chooses to stay poor, destiny will eventually find a way to make one rich. At the end of his discussions on fate and fortunes, Wang Chong brings up the story of King Yi of Yue 越王翳, who was smoked out of his cave by his people, who wanted to make him their king, a job that he never wanted.³⁴ So, for Wang Chong, becoming noble and rich is indeed independent of one's will.

33. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 26.

34. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 26. This story is also preserved in several other early sources, but the commentaries to the *Lun heng* indicate that Wang Chong must have read this

footnote continued on next page

At this point, it may already be apparent that Wang Chong's fatalism is more radical than that of his predecessors. The author(s) of "Qionгда yi shi" would have agreed with Wang Chong that social success does not always follow talent and hard work, but there is no indication that they would go so far as to agree that even those who are lazy and unwilling can still end up rich and noble. In "Qionгда yi shi," it is still necessary to cultivate one's virtue and talents in order to grasp the rare opportunities. Talent and hard work are necessary but not sufficient conditions for success. For Wang Chong, however, they are not conditions at all.

Some scholars contend that Wang Chong's emphasis is not on things determined at a level beyond our reach but on those elements that we can control.³⁵ And indeed, there are points where Wang Chong emphasizes the importance of hard work despite his fatalistic beliefs.

有求而不得者矣，未必不求而得之者也。精學不求貴，貴自至矣；力作不求富，富自到矣。³⁶

There are cases in which people seek [to be rich] yet do not attain it, but this does not necessarily imply that one attains [wealth] without seeking it. When one devotes oneself to studies without seeking nobility, nobility will arrive on its own, and when one puts forth one's strength without seeking wealth, wealth will arrive on its own.

If this passage is taken as a true reflection of Wang Chong's idea of fate, then we could conclude that his philosophy does not extend to the realm of moral cultivation. He believes that when we exert ourselves in learning and stay diligent without aspiring to be rich and noble, success may come on its own.

But this interpretation is problematic. Just prior to the sentences quoted above, Wang Chong compares the diligence of hard-working people to the physical attributes of a swift horse.

夫命富之人，筋力自彊，命貴之人，才智自高，若千里之馬，頭目蹄足自相副也。³⁷

The muscles of those whose *ming* is to be rich are naturally stronger, and the talent and intellect of those whose *ming* is to be noble are naturally superior. This is comparable to a swift horse [that can run a thousand *li* a day]: its head, eyes, feet, and legs are all naturally assist it.

story from the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, as he refers to the protagonist as King Yue of Yi. In *Zhuangzi* and *Lishi chunqiu*, he is referred to as the Prince Sou 王子搜.

35. E.g. Teruko, "Ō Jū no seisetsu," 219–20; Kalinowski, *Balance des discours*, LXXXVI.

36. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 26 ("Ming lu").

37. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 26.

In this analogy, Wang Chong essentially claims that even the ability to exert the effort to pursue fortune and honor is decided by our *ming*. Just as a swift horse can naturally use its various body parts to run faster, people who are destined to be rich and noble are naturally excellent in some key qualities relevant to success. It is not these qualities themselves that bring about success but only their *ming*. According to Wang Chong, if one's *ming* is to be wealthy, one will be born with stronger muscles that are conducive to working harder than others. Likewise, people who are destined to be noble will be born with the superior talent and intelligence that is necessary for attaining high office.

One might argue that even if the extent of one's talents, intelligence, and muscular strength are decided at birth, and even if those qualities can indeed affect one's eventual fortunes, this says nothing about one's ability to strive to be a better person. Even if one may be of inferior mind and body, nothing can hinder a person from cultivating morality.

However, Wang Chong does make a similarly fatalistic claim about our moral tendencies. Wang Chong argues that just as we all have different levels of talent, we have different "natures" (*xing* 性), which decide our moral tendencies.³⁸

實者、人性有善有惡，猶人才有高有下也，高不可下，下不可高。謂性無善惡，是謂人才無高下也。³⁹

The truth is, the fact that some people have good nature while others have evil nature is like the fact that some people have superior talents while others have inferior talents. Superior talent cannot be made inferior; inferior talent cannot be made superior. To say that there is no difference in good and evil in human nature is to say that there is no difference in superiority or inferiority in individual talent.

For Wang Chong, there is no question that such differences in human nature or talent are all predetermined at birth. A person's moral

38. The exact definition of *xing* can vary depending on scholars in the late Warring States period (cf. Paul R. Goldin, *After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 37–43.), but the translation "human nature" for *xing* in the sense of "The inherent dominating power or impulse in a person by which character or action is determined, directed, or controlled" may be appropriate in Wang Chong's case. See "nature, n." OED Online. January 2018. Oxford University Press, accessed February 19, 2018.

39. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 142 ("Ben xing").

tendencies are determined by his or her nature, just as one's fortunes are determined by one's *ming*.

性自有善惡，命自有吉凶。使命吉之人，雖不行善，未必無福；凶命之人，雖勉操行，未必無禍。孟子曰：「求之有道，得之有命。」性善乃能求之，命善乃能得之。⁴⁰

Good and evil are inherent in one's nature, while auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are inherent in one's *ming*. If a person has auspicious *ming*, even if his or her actions are not good, that does not necessarily prevent fortune. [In contrast,] if a person has inauspicious *ming*, even if his or her actions are earnest, that does not necessarily prevent misfortune. Mencius said: "In seeking [fortune], there is a proper way, but attaining it depends on *ming*." (*Mengzi* 7A:3) [This means that] only those who are good by nature can seek [fortune], but only those who have good *ming* can attain it.

Here, Wang Chong makes a clear distinction between *xing* and *ming*: *ming* concerns the social aspect of our life, the aspect pertaining to one's fortune, while *xing* concerns our moral tendency. However, the two are alike in the sense that they are both predetermined at birth. For this reason, Wang Chong sometimes equates the two.⁴¹ Wang Chong does not mention the existence of the ordinary people 中人 here, but his argument that human nature can be categorized into three types, good, evil, and ordinary, is also reminiscent of his belief in three categories of *ming*.⁴²

What Wang Chong tries to emphasize in the second passage is that being born with a good nature does not necessarily guarantee success, or vice versa. Yet, in his unique interpretation of *Mengzi* 7A:3, Wang Chong again reveals his belief that only those who are born with a good nature can seek to attain fortune.⁴³ This means that people who are born with an evil nature are not capable of seeking fortune themselves—even though they can still become rich and noble. In other words, in Wang Chong's thought, it is not only the realm of social success that is

40. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 50–51 ("Ming yi").

41. E.g. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 26, 47, 49–50.

42. In one passage, Wang Chong also uses the same names of the three kinds of *ming* to describe the three kinds of human nature: the correct 正, the encountered 遭, and the ensuing 隨. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 52.

43. By cropping the two clauses from the entire passage at 7A:3, Wang Chong made it seem as if Mencius was making equal but separate claims about "seeking" and "attaining." In truth, however, they are both parts of a conditional clause in Mencius's statement on the external nature of social success.

predetermined but also that of personal conduct, namely our will to do good and ability to strive for success.⁴⁴

Moral Freedom

Wang Chong states that people like King Zhou 紂, the infamous last ruler of the Shang dynasty, was born evil and his wickedness was only a natural development of his innate tendencies.

紂為孩子之時，微子睹其不善之性，性惡不出眾庶，長大為亂不變 …
紂之惡，在孩子之時 … 孩子始生，未與物接，誰令悖者？⁴⁵

When Zhou was [still] a child, the Viscount of Wei (Zhou's older half-brother) observed the evilness of his nature. [Even though as a child] the evilness of his nature did not stick out amongst ordinary people, that he would cause chaos after growing up remained unchanged ... The evilness of King Zhou was already there when he was a child ... When a child is born, he is yet to be in contact with [external] objects. What is it that makes him delinquent?

If Zhou was born with evil tendencies, was it absolutely inevitable for him to become evil? It is one thing to say that a person can be born with evil tendencies and entirely another to say that it is inevitable for some people to become evil. The former only implies that it is more difficult for some to become good than for others, but not impossible. The latter, on the other hand, truly challenges the notion of the freedom to choose between good and evil.

There are passages in Wang Chong's writings that support both interpretations. For example, the "Shuaixing" chapter argues that even people born with an evil nature can be guided to goodness through education.

論人之性，定有善有惡。其善者，固自善矣；其惡者，故可教告率勉，使之為善。⁴⁶

44. Incidentally, this idea is remarkably reminiscent of John Calvin's doctrine of predestination. Calvin argues that God has already elected those who are to be raised to heaven and rejected those who are to be sent to hell, and his choices are purely based on his mercy and not on our faith or works. At the same time, however, he argues that faith is the instrumental cause of our salvation, by which God displays his mercy. This implies that, in Calvin's theory, only those who were pre-elected by God can have faith and perform works that are pleasing to God. Cf. Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 389–406; I. John Hesselink, "Calvin's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83–84.

45. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 134–35 ("Ben xing").

46. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 68 ("Shuai xing").

Speaking of human natures, some are fixed to be good while others fixed set to be evil. Those with good [nature] truly become good on their own, but those with evil [nature] are to be made to do good, as they can be educated, instructed, guided, and encouraged.

According to this passage, Wang Chong does not argue that one's moral tendencies are irreversibly predetermined. While some are certainly born in a way that is easier for them to turn to evil (and hence more difficult to coerce into goodness), it is not the case that they inevitably become evil.

Elsewhere, however, he argues that there are people who are born extremely evil or extremely good, and whose natures can never be changed. The possibility of moral transformation is reserved only for ordinary people.

孔子曰：「性相近也，習相遠也。」夫中人之性，在所習焉，習善而為善，習惡而為惡也。至於極善極惡，非復在習，故孔子曰：「惟上智與下愚不移。」性有善不善，聖化賢教，不能復移易也。⁴⁷

Confucius said: "By nature [people] are alike, but by practice [they] become different" (*Lun yu* 17:2). The natures of those ordinary people depend on what they practice. If they practice good, they become good, but if they practice evil, they become evil. [But] for those who are extremely good or extremely evil, it no longer depends on practice. Therefore Confucius said: "The wisest and the most foolish do not change." (*Lun yu* 17:3) When good and evil are in one's nature, [even with] education from sages and worthy people, they cannot be changed again.

This appears to be a contradiction. Evil nature either can be guided to goodness or is permanently fixed. However, if we look at Wang Chong's instructions on how to transform a person's nature, we can discover that in terms of moral autonomy, he is actually quite consistent. Even when he argues that one's nature can be changed, he does not say that human beings are capable of choosing between good or evil on their own. Rather, the change is possible only through the effort of rulers and fathers who have carefully discerned their subjects' and children's nature and guided them accordingly.

凡人君父，審觀臣子之性，善則養育勸率，無令近惡；近惡則輔保禁防，令漸於善。善漸於惡，惡化於善，成為性行。⁴⁸

47. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 137 ("Ben xing").

48. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 68 ("Shuai xing").

As a rule, rulers and fathers [should] closely examine their subjects' and children's nature. If their nature is good, raise them and guide them without letting them near evil. If they are near evil, protect them and guard them while letting them be permeated by goodness. When goodness permeates evil, and evil is transformed by goodness, they can be made to do [good] as if by nature.

In this brief instruction, all the attention is focused on exerting good influence upon children and subjects. The individual, the target of moral transformation, plays only a passive role in the process of moral transformation. Compare this position with that of Xunzi, who stipulates one's will as a necessary condition for moral transformation.

小人可以為君子而不肯為君子，君子可以為小人而不肯為小人。小人、君子者，未嘗不可以相為也，然而不相為者，可以而不可使也。⁴⁹

A petty man can become a noble man, but he does not wish to be one; a noble man can become a petty man, but he does not wish to be one. There has never been a case in which either a petty man or a noble man was not able to become the other. But [the reason that] they do not become one another is that while it is possible, they cannot be forced to [change].

Of course, for Wang Chong, there is a theoretical problem in emphasizing one's will as a condition of moral transformation. If one was to will oneself good on one's own, it would mean that one's nature was not completely evil in the first place. Therefore, the moment Wang Chong puts emphasis on one's will, he has to admit that those who are born evil are inevitably doomed to become evil.

But let us set aside the cases of extremely evil-natured people, who may be rare, and turn to what Wang Chong calls the ordinary people, who have a mixture of good and evil in their nature. Theoretically, they should be able to choose between good and evil, as they were born with both tendencies. But even when Wang Chong is discussing ordinary people, his instructions on moral transformation do not change. The emphasis is still on the educator and not on the educated.

There is one passage where Wang Chong can be interpreted as emphasizing human will:

召公戒成[王]曰：「今王初服厥命，於戲！若生子，罔不在厥初生。」
「生子」謂十五子，初生意於善，終以善；初生意於惡，終以惡。⁵⁰

49. *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1988), 443 ("Xing e" 性惡).

50. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 68 ("Shuai xing").

The Duke of Shao adjured King Cheng, saying: “Now the king has received the mandate for the first time. Oh! You are like a child, [for whom] everything depends on the first years.” (“Shaogao”) By “child,” he means a child of age fifteen (or under). When the intention is on good during one’s first years, the child will be good to the end; but when the intention is on evil during one’s first years, the child will be evil to the end.

Here, Wang Chong talks about the importance of intention *yi* 意, but the question is, whose intention is it? Is it really that of the child? When we examine this passage in connection with the following passage, it appears that the intention belongs to the child’s father, not the child. Immediately after this passage, Wang Chong claims that the process of moral transformation in children is like the process of dyeing a sheet of silk. It absorbs the color of a pigment without any resistance:

十五之子，其猶絲也。其有所漸化為善惡，猶藍丹之染練絲，使之為青赤也。青赤一成，真色無異。⁵¹

Children of age fifteen (or under) are like silk. They can be gradually changed to goodness or evilness as dyeing a plain sheet of silk with indigo or cinnabar turns it into blue or red. Once they are turned blue or red, the colors are no different from the true colors of [indigo and cinnabar.]

The silk does not make a decision for itself to be red or blue, but simply absorbs the color chosen by the dyer. In this analogy, the dyer actually determines (*shi* 使) the color of the silk. Notice that the verb *shi* used here is precisely what Xunzi used when he argued that one cannot “force” a petty man to become a noble man. For Wang Chong, not only can you force a person to become good, but it seems to be the only method.

Also noteworthy is the age limit set by Wang Chong after which moral transformation is no longer possible. Wang Chong does not completely deny the possibility of moral transformation for adults. For example, he mentions how Confucius was able to guide and educate his disciple Zilu 子路 (d. 480 B.C.E.), who was only nine years junior to Confucius but whose “evil was extremely severe” *e zhishen yi* 惡至甚矣.⁵² (Note that it was not Zilu who transformed himself with the teachings of Confucius, but Confucius who transformed Zilu.) Cases like these may be rare, and after all, this was the work of Confucius himself. For ordinary human beings, Wang Chong sees that even when one’s moral tendency is not

51. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 70.

52. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 72–73.

completely fixed toward either good or evil at birth, it will soon end up fixed as if they were born that way.

We may understand Wang Chong's defense of the possibility of moral transformation as his final resistance against a position of complete moral determinism.⁵³ He does not wish to say that our morality is irreversibly fixed from our birth, but he still thinks that the transformation is extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible, for some people. In any case, Wang Chong maintains that human beings do not have much freedom to choose between good and evil on their own.

There is one more question to be asked about moral freedom. Even if we cannot make choices about our own morality, are we at least free in changing the tendencies of other human beings? Is there freedom of choice? When so many things are decided at birth, including our moral tendencies and ability to strive for success, is there any part of our lives that is not predetermined at birth? Wang Chong makes claims that require reflection.

Wang Chong, a Fatalist?

Let us reexamine the case of Confucius and Zilu briefly mentioned above. After studying with Confucius, Zilu went to Wei 衛 and served the house of Kong Kui 孔悝. But while he was in Wei, Kong Kui and Kui Kui 蒧聵 succeeded in a *coup d'état*, and Zilu was killed in the aftermath.⁵⁴ For Wang Chong, there is no doubt that Zilu's death was predetermined by his *ming*.⁵⁵ But had he not met Confucius, and had Confucius not transformed his evil nature, he probably would not have come to serve Kong Kui in the first place. Consequently, he would not have been affected by the *coup* in Wei. If Zilu's death in Wei was inevitable, is it not the case that Confucius' act of guiding Zilu to goodness was also inevitable?

In order to exempt Confucius's act from the inevitability of Zilu's *ming*, we need to postulate that Wang Chong's concept of *ming* is not concerned with *how* one dies, but only *when* one dies. So, we can say that even if Zilu were not serving the house of Kong at that particular time, he could have still died by some other cause. Even if the very people who killed Zilu had elected to act otherwise at the last minute, Zilu would probably have died soon after.

53. This is the opposite conclusion of that suggested by McLeod in his *The Philosophical Thought of Wang Chong*, 227. See n.14 above.

54. "Zhongni dizi liezhuan" *Shiki kaichū kōshō* 史記會注考證 (Beijing: Wenxue guji, 1955), 3355–56.

55. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 100 ("Ou hui" 偶會).

Wang Chong, however, does not endorse this limited definition of *ming*. He makes it explicit that *ming* concerns various aspects of our lives.

命，吉凶之主也，自然之道，適偶之數。⁵⁶

Ming is the master of good and ill fortune, the path of spontaneity, and the order of chance and coincidence.

This claim is consistent with the position above, where Wang Chong claimed that “people’s opportunities [for success] or encountering continuous disasters are all due to *ming*.” In Wang Chong’s view, *ming* does not stay inactive until the moment of destiny, but continuously interferes with our lives.

Does this indeed mean that Confucius was not free when he “decided” to take Zilu as his disciple? Wang Chong’s answer to this question does not appear in his surviving works, but we may guess his answer through his remarks about similar cases, namely the deaths of Wu Zixu 伍子胥 (d. 484 B.C.E.) and Qu Yuan 屈原 (c. 340–278 B.C.E.).

世謂子胥伏劍，屈原自沉，子蘭、宰嚭誣讒，吳、楚之君冤殺之也。偶二子命當絕，子蘭、宰嚭適為讒，而懷王、夫差適信姦也。君適不明，臣適為讒，二子之命，偶自不長，二偶三合，似若有之，其實自然，非他為也。⁵⁷

What people say about Wu Zixu’s stabbing himself with the sword and Qu Yuan’s drowning himself [in a river] is that they were slandered by Minister Bo Pi and Zilan and were unjustly killed by the rulers of Wu and Chu, respectively. [However, the truth is that] the two reached [the time when] their lives were to be cut short, and Zilan and Bo Pi happened to slander them, and King Huai and Fucha happened to believe their deceitful [words]. Rulers happened to be dimwitted, and their subjects happened to slander [the two], and the lives of the two men came to a natural [point at which] they could not be extended further. It seems as if it was by chance that the two men came to [situations in which] the three [factors] merged, but the truth is that it was spontaneously so. There was nothing else that made it so.

It is noteworthy that Wang Chong uses the word *di* 適 (happen to), instead of something like *bi* 必 (necessarily), to describe the actions of those who brought about to the deaths of Wu Zixu and Qu Yuan. Wang

56. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 99.

57. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 99.

Chong argues that they just “happened” to act in such ways when it was time for the two men’s deaths. But saying that some people “happened” to act in a way can imply that they had an option to act in some way other than they actually did. Is this really how Wang Chong sees the actions of the slanderers and dimwitted kings?

Shao Yiping has argued that, for Wang Chong, the necessity of *ming* is completed through contingent events, which means he believes that the kings and slanderers indeed had the freedom to act otherwise.⁵⁸ But Wang Chong claims that the whole chain of actions from the slandering of Bo Pi and Zilan to the deaths of Wu Zixu and Qu Yuan was made spontaneously, and that the path of spontaneity is none other than *ming*. If *ming* encompasses all those events leading to its eventual realization, how can preceding events be any less inevitable than the final one?⁵⁹ They may occur under the guise of coincidence, but in order for the events to be truly contingent, Wang Chong’s concept of *ming* has to be the limited one that does not concern the means of death but only its time. This is not the case.

Perhaps Wang Chong chose to say that the slanderers and kings “happened” to act as they did rather than that they “had” to, because he did not want to imply that they were not responsible for their actions.⁶⁰ Although they happened to act in ways that contributed to the realization of the two people’s *ming*, they still acted on their own. No one, or nothing, forced Bo Pi and Zilan to slander Wu Zixu and Qu Yuan, and Heaven did not make the kings dimwitted just so that they would kill Wu Zixu and Qu Yuan. This is, in fact, the point that Wang Chong tries to convey in the “Ou hui” 偶會 chapter as a whole: that there is no willful being that controls courses of events to bring about particular results. Events transpire on their own, but their combination leads to the realization of predetermined *ming*.

If this is indeed Wang Chong’s intention, we may place Wang Chong in the same group as classical compatibilists, who argue that if we define freedom as “the unencumbered ability of an agent to do what she wants,” a person can be said to have acted freely even when there

58. Shao Yiping, *Lun heng yanjiu*, 302.

59. For a succinct explanation on the theoretical necessity of the preceding events leading to the final fated event, see Bernstein, “Fatalism,” 66–67.

60. Many influential contemporary philosophers have tried to show that our conception of moral responsibility is not necessarily dependent upon the freedom to act otherwise. See, for example, Harry G. Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 66.23 (1969), 829; Daniel C. Dennett, “I Could Not Have Done Otherwise—so What?,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 81.10 (1984), 553–65. However, the fact that the debate is still ongoing suggests that the association between the two is not easy to deny entirely.

were no alternate possibilities.⁶¹ A drug addict, for example, may feel a strong desire for drugs and willingly consume them without any remorse although he/she never really had the option to act otherwise.⁶² Likewise, Bo Pi and Zilan could have sincerely wanted to slander Wu Zixu and Qu Yuan and actually did so even though acting otherwise was impossible in the first place. In this way, we may explain how Bo Pi and Zilan could have “happened” to act as they did while still being tied to the inevitability of Wu Zixu and Qu Yuan’s *ming*.

When we accept that the kings and slanderers were never free to act otherwise, we must ask how many of our own actions are truly free. According to Wang Chong, anything that has a head, eyes, and blood has *ming*.⁶³ This obviously includes animals. Then, if a farmer killed a chicken for the family dinner one night, could one say that the farmer’s killing of the chicken was also predetermined by the chicken’s *ming*? Is there any event or action that is not a part of some *ming*? Innumerable instances of our actions must be a part of someone’s (or something’s) *ming*. In order to answer this question, we should revisit Wang Chong’s understanding of *ming*. To what extent does *ming* dictate our lives?

As strongly as Wang Chong believes in the irreversibility of *ming*, he admits that there are people whose lives do not proceed as predetermined by their *ming*. For example, if there is a war or a natural disaster, some people can die early, even though they were originally destined to live long:

歷陽之都，男女俱沒；長平之坑，老少並陷，萬數之中，必有長命未當死之人，遭時衰微，兵革並起，不得終其壽。⁶⁴

In a city in Liyang [which turned into a lake overnight], men and women all drowned together, and in the pits of Changping, old and young were all buried [alive]. Among the tens of thousands [who met sudden deaths], there must have been people who had *ming* to live long and were not supposed to die. However, they encountered a declining age, in which wars and revolutions rise simultaneously. [Hence,] they were unable to live up to their proper lifespan.

61. Michael McKenna and D. Justin Coates, “Compatibilism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/compatibilism/>. See especially section 3.

62. For a more detailed analysis of this example, see John Martin Fischer, “Responsibility and Control,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79.1 (1982), 27–28.

63. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 20 (“Ming lu”).

64. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 44 (“Ming yi”).

Wang Chong does not argue that the numerous people who died at Liyang and Changping all had the same fate to die there. Some must have had a better fate but encountered a declining age and were forced to deviate from their original fate. The strange part of this explanation is Wang Chong's use of the term "encounter" 遭. As we have seen, Wang Chong has argued that our encountering of chances of success or troubles and disasters are all controlled by our *ming*.⁶⁵ Those who are destined to be poor will face misfortune even if someone were to grant them money and honor and vice versa. Yet here, he seems to be arguing that one can encounter events that can effectively thwart the realization of one's predetermined *ming*. Wang Chong has an explanation for this apparent contradiction:

命善祿盛，遭逢之禍不能害也。歷陽之都，長平之坑，其中必有命善祿盛之人，一宿同填而死，遭逢之禍大，命善祿盛不能卻也。譬猶水火相更也，水盛勝火，火盛勝水。⁶⁶

When one's *ming* and fortunes are good and abundant, the disasters that one encounters cannot harm one. [Yet] among the people at the city in Liyang and in the pits of Changping, there must have been people whose *ming* and fortunes were good and abundant, but they were all buried and died overnight. When the disaster that one encounters is enormous, good *ming* and abundant fortunes cannot repel it. This is like the mutually opposing [relationship] between water and fire. If water is abundant, it wins over a fire, and when a fire is strong, it wins over water.

In Wang Chong's view, anyone can encounter events that hinder the realization of one's original *ming*. Even in the passage where he uses the term "encounter" to explain events in life that ultimately redirect the course of one's life back into alignment with predetermined *ming*, he is acknowledging the possibility that one's life can deviate, at least temporarily, from one's original *ming*. When these events occur on a grand scale, however, they can be powerful enough to permanently overcome the original *ming*.

What is the provenance of these grand-scale events that undermine the power of individuals' fates? If Wang Chong believes that these events are contingent, then he may not even qualify as a fatalist in the loose sense, as his concept of fate would not carry the sense of inevitability.

65. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 20 ("Ming lu").

66. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 57 ("Ming yi").

But Wang Chong does not take this route. Instead, he explains these events as predetermined at a different level of *ming*.

人命有長短，時有盛衰，衰則疾病，被災蒙禍之驗也。宋、衛、陳、鄭同日並災，四國之民，必有祿盛未當衰之人，然而俱災，國禍陵之也。故國命勝人命，壽命勝祿命。… 國命繫於眾星，列宿吉凶，國有禍福；眾星推移，人有盛衰。⁶⁷

Some people have *ming* for a long life while others have *ming* for a short life. Some ages flourish while other ages decline. When [the age] is in decline, [people] are ill. This is the result of experiencing disasters and suffering misfortune. There was a disaster in Song, Wei, Chen, and Zheng on the same day; among the people of the four states, there must have been people who were destined to be rich and were not supposed to face decline, but they were together in the disaster. This is because misfortunes of a state are above the [fates] of individuals. Therefore, the *ming* of a state overcomes the *ming* of an individual, and the *ming* of lifespan overcomes the *ming* of fortune . . . The *ming* of a state is connected to the myriad stars. Depending on auspiciousness and inauspiciousness of various asterisms, a state can either have fortune or misfortune. Depending on the movements of the myriad stars, people flourish or decline.

Wang Chong presents a world with multiple layers of *ming* that govern courses of events on different levels. When the *ming* of a higher hierarchy (for example, that of a state) does not interfere with that of the lower level (that of an individual), the individual will live as predetermined by the *ming* that he/she was born with. However, if the higher *ming* brings about events that involve a great number of people, events that were predetermined by the lesser *ming* will not be realized. In either case, however, the conclusion seems to be that “whatever happens must happen” as in Bernstein’s definition of fatalism,⁶⁸ and there is no event that is not caused by *ming*. Events that are conducive to the realization of one’s original *ming* are brought by one’s own *ming*, and events that hinder its realization are brought by different *ming*. Thus, the deaths of the people at Changping and Liyang were predetermined at one level or another.

However, it is this hierarchy of *ming* that actually opens up room for freedom in Wang Chong’s fatalistic world. The argument that our *ming* is realized when a higher level of *ming* does not interfere implies that the higher *ming* does not dictate all courses of events. That higher *ming* concerns only a limited number of events that are necessary to

67. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 45–46 (“Ming yi”).

68. Bernstein, “Fatalism,” 65.

bring about fated outcomes. In a similar manner, we can assume that *ming* of individuals does not dictate every event and every action in our lives. We are free to do what we will and desire in affairs that are not predetermined by our *ming*. Even in matters that are predetermined by our *ming*, it may be that *ming* does not dictate the course of events down to the minute level. For instance, it may have been inevitable for Bo Pi and Zilan to slander Wu Zixu and Qu Yuan at that particular time, but it is probably not the case that their exact speeches were scripted by *ming*.

To summarize, even though *ming* may be "the path of spontaneity," it does not preside over every event of our lives. Wang Chong's world is not like the world of divine providence, in which "all events are governed by God's secret plan and that nothing takes place without his deliberation,"⁶⁹ or like Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony, in which all events occur according to a pre-established plan.⁷⁰ *Ming*, as powerful as it may be in Wang Chong's thought, leaves room for us to act freely.

It is undeniable, however, that within Wang Chong's thought, human beings have very limited freedom, and no one is capable of defying fate in the end. His philosophy represents an extreme interpretation of the view that people are born with different fates. Fate determines not only our longevity, but also wealth, social success, ability to strive for success, moral tendency, etc. in different ways for different people.

Conclusion

Wang Chong argued that everyone is born with a different kind of *ming*. Some are born to die old, while others are born to die young; some are born to be rich and noble, while others are born to be poor and humble. And no amount of effort can change the *ming* that one was born with. On the contrary, even the very amount of effort that one can exert in striving to be successful will depend on the qualities that one was born with. In the end, if a person is found out to have had a blissful life, there can be no other explanation than that his *ming* was so good from the beginning.

69. Cf. Deng Hong 鄧紅, "Ō Jū 'mei'ron shin'gi" 王充「命」論新議, *Bulletin of Oita Prefectural College of Arts and Culture* 大分県立芸術文化短期大学研究紀要 40 (2002), A19–30. This definition comes from Paul Helm's explanation of John Calvin's version of divine providence. Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 96.

70. Cf. Daniel Leslie, "Les théories de Wang Tch'ong sur la causalité," in *Mélanges de sinologie offerts à Monsieur Paul Demiéville*, vol. 2 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1974), 184–86. Daniel Leslie inappropriately compares Wang Chong's philosophy to Leibniz's doctrine of pre-established harmony. But Wang Chong does not deny intersubstantial causation as does Leibniz. While Wang Chong maintains that there are cases comparable to a fire being extinguished just as water is poured over the fire (no causation), he also accepts that water can indeed put out a fire. *Lun heng jiaoshi*, 104.

For Wang Chong, the idea of predetermination extends to one's morality as well. For the greater part, one's moral tendencies are determined at birth. Some are born to be good, while others are born to be evil. Even in places where Wang Chong apparently admits the possibility of moral transformation, he does not regard humans as conscious moral agents. If a change in one's innate moral tendency is ever possible, it is never a result of one's own endeavor but rather that of those around one, whose actions may have been in turn prescribed by *ming*.

Wang Chong nevertheless acknowledges cases in which the predetermined course of life is not realized, but this is not because a person's *ming* can be changed; rather, there is *ming* of a higher rank, which can overrule individuals' *ming*. Wang Chong's concept of a hierarchy of *ming*, however, implies that he does not view *ming* as a force that dictates every single event in the world. The fact that one's personal *ming* remains intact as long as it does not conflict with the *ming* of a state indicates that the scope of the latter *ming* is narrower than that of the former. Similarly, we can assume that one's personal *ming* does not cover all aspects of one's life. Thus, Wang Chong's philosophy presents a life in which we have limited freedom within a largely fatalistic world.

王充的宿命論

宋允宇

提要

儘管王充經常被歸類為宿命論者，但許多學者認為王充認可個人的道德自治，因為他認為教育可以改變人天生的道德傾向。他甚至承認，個人的人生能與他自己的「命」完全不同。我在本文中表明即使王充似乎聲稱個人努力在生活中很重要，他也依然主張個人努力工作的能力或努力成為一個更好的人的能力，都幾乎在出生時已經被決定。即使他認為生性極惡的人也能被引導至善良，但他絕沒有暗示人性之善良抑或邪惡取決於自己的選擇。如果有人並沒有如「命」所定的那樣生活，那僅僅是因為存在著另一種「命」。它比個人的「命」更強大，從而干擾了原有之「命」，而非因為原有之「命」被改變了。因此，由於宿命論意味著每件事都會成為必然，王充不是真正的宿命論者，但即使如此，我認為他也非常接近成為一個完全的宿命論者，因為他認為在我們生活中，我們大多數情況都不得不以「命」中注定的方式行動。

Keywords: Wang Chong, fatalism, moral autonomy, freedom of choice, compatibilism

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