

CICERO AND WANG CHONG AND THEIR CRITIQUE OF DIVINATION

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This article aims to present Cicero and Wang Chong as theorists of divination. While it has already been determined that they advanced both defenses and criticisms, I specifically intend to focus on their significant criticisms of divination, which emerged as corrective for the practice by supporting or disapproving and extending or limiting its underlying principles. I also emphasize that these thinkers have different objectives and emphases in their criticisms. Cicero's objective is to maintain the fundamental teachings of their forefathers, prompting him to criticize anything that contradicts their teachings. Wang Chong's objective is to make an appeal and encourage their people to be critical, and he often showed this through his criticism of the old, their classic texts, or even their tradition. In bringing them together, I show a robust and united rebuttal to the old ways of thinking about the divine and its ritualization. In conclusion, I offer an analysis that their critical attitudes, although different and may even be opposed, are complementary and both necessary.

Keywords: Cicero, Wang Chong, divination, critique

INTRODUCTION

There is the usual dissociation between divination and philosophy. However, it is also evident that there are significant instances where philosophical reflection and appraisal of divination figures in ancient philosophical texts. In the opening line of the first book of *De Divinatione*, Cicero (1923, 223) asserts the ubiquity and long history of divination, which implies its crucial role in the past. Arguably, this is one sterling reason why it did not escape the attention of the philosophers who took divination as an object of their debates.

In her recent works, Raphals (2012; 2013, 386) studies and compares the early philosophical debates on divination, where she also identifies Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BCE—43 BCE) and 王充 Wang Chong (27 CE—ca 97 CE) as the first theorists of such practice in the ancient Greco-Roman and early Chinese traditions.¹ However, she mentions that their defenses and criticisms of divination may simply be the foundation of different arguments and objectives. Raphals (2012)—and this is also the

case in Puett's (2005/2006, 275) earlier observation—describes Wang Chong's critique as highly rhetorical, for it showed little engagement with the practice of divination and his aim is to argue about the nature and role of the sages. In the case of Cicero, she explains how the previous debates on divination were employed to introduce Greek philosophy to the Romans.

In this article, I likewise aim to present Cicero and Wang Chong as theorists of divination. While it has already been determined that they advanced both defenses and criticisms, I intend to focus on their criticisms of divination, which emerged as corrective for the practice by supporting or disapproving and extending or limiting its underlying principles. It is the main point of this article to discuss their significant criticisms of divination—i.e., how Cicero fought superstition and how Wang Chong rectified the false views of his time. Notably, these thinkers have different objectives and emphases in their criticisms. On the one hand, Cicero's objective is to maintain the fundamental teachings of their forefathers, prompting him to criticize anything that contradicts their teachings. On the other hand, Wang Chong's objective is to make an appeal and encourage their people to be critical, and he often showed this through his criticism of the old, their classic texts, or even their tradition. In bringing them together, I aim to show a robust and united rebuttal to the old ways of thinking about the divine and its ritualization. Their critical attitudes toward divination, although different and may even be opposed to each other, are complementary and are both necessary for various reasons. In other words, their difference lies between the preservation and criticism of the old, which, I reiterate, are complementary and necessary.

DIVINATION AS AN OBJECT OF CRITIQUE

The term divination is Latin in origin. Cicero (1923, 223) introduced this term in Latin as *divinatio*, which is the equivalent of the Greek word *μαντική* (*mantike*). What makes this Latin term distinct is that it emphasizes the role of the divine in foreseeing the future, implying that such practice is part of the Roman religion (Cicero 1933, 291). Cicero categorized the different forms of divination into two. The first is artificial divination which includes the prophecies of soothsayers (inspection of entrails or haruspicy), the interpretation of prodigies and lightning, the art of augury, omens, and astrology. The second is natural divination which includes dreams and frenzy. In the case of Wang Chong, he did not have a unified term to identify the practices that aim to gain foreknowledge of the future. Still, he prominently discussed the following forms: the use of milfoil stalks, the use of shells of tortoises, anthroposcopy, and the appearance of omens or portents. Field (2008, 2) suggests that 占卜 *zhanbu* and 算命 *suanming* are general terms for Chinese divination. However, in the context of Wang Chong, he rarely used the term *zhanbu* or only twice in the entire work, and he never mentioned the term *suanming*. For ease of scholarship, I maintain the term divination to refer to those practices.

Cicero and Wang Chong regarded divination as a practice to ascertain the future. However, a more profound understanding of their works suggests that they also included the present and past dimensions, making divination an enterprise that is not solely focused on the future. This is evident in Cicero's discussion of artificial

divination since it relies on the experience or observation of past events to assess the present and future. Even though the chief emphasis is on the future, this form of divination does not entirely remove the past and the present since it is impossible to exclude them in the process of interpretation. In the case of Wang Chong, the role of these three temporal dimensions is evident in his criticism of the common view and interpretation that the omens of the past must be identical with the present and future omens in determining the legitimacy of a dynasty and the experience of universal peace. As Wang Chong criticized this view of finding identical omens, he maintained that paying attention to the uniqueness of different periods is crucial. Following the above discussion, it is therefore apt in this comparative study between Cicero and Wang Chong to adopt Raphals' (2013, 1) definition of divination as "a deliberate search for understanding of the *hidden* significance of events in the future, present, or past."

In Greek usage, Koselleck (2006, 359) notes that the term critique (*kritik*) means "'decision' in the sense of reaching a verdict or judgment." It is initially part of the term "crisis," which is from the Greek verb κρίνω (*krinō*), meaning to separate, to choose, to judge, to decide, to measure oneself, to quarrel, or to fight. In modern and contemporary times, the term critique also surfaced prominently, which de Boer and Sonderegger (2012, 2) describe in the following:

Critique always seems to arise from the need to draw a line between, on the one hand, forms of knowledge, culture, or politics alleged to have become inadequate and, on the other hand, forms of knowledge, culture, or politics considered to possess a liberating, emancipatory or future-oriented force.

This description and the Greek usage, as they emphasize judgments and distinctions, imply the pragmatic aspects of critique as corrective and transformative tools. In other words, since critique is a matter of reaching a decision or judgment, and it is the ability to sort out what remains adequate and what does not, it serves as a corrective tool that will eventually lead to the transformation of inadequate ways.

Arguably, these pragmatic aspects of critique are present in the writings of Cicero and Wang Chong, as divination appeared in their texts as an object of critique or debate. It is, however, important to note that critique in their senses may only be analogous to the understanding presented above due to several factors, such as historical and cultural conditions, sources, etc. For instance, the terms liberating and emancipatory are very much loaded and have modern or contemporary connotations. However, then, they may still be used to analogously describe the goals of Cicero and Wang Chong in their critique. Simply put, their critique may also be considered liberating and emancipatory in their own contexts since they aimed to liberate their readers from superstition or false views. Moreover, their view and manner of critique are informed by their philosophical orientation. In Cicero's case, it was shaped by Academic Skepticism, and it is due to Wang Chong's independence as a thinker that allowed him to criticize various issues more freely.

Cicero, Critique, and Academic Skepticism

Curnow (2003) describes *De Divinatione* as the only ancient extant writing that systematically examines divination. Perhaps, Cicero's adherence to *Academica* or the Academy is one possible reason why this writing is systematic. It is a school of thought whose name is reminiscent of the Greek *Academy*, a gymnasium where Plato, Socrates, and their followers assembled and discussed. Plutarch (1919, 87 and 99) identifies Philo of Larissa and Antiochus of Ascalon as the two instrumental figures in Cicero's encounter with the Academy.

The Academy is also referred to as Academic Skepticism.² In general, skepticism is the philosophical attitude committed to inquiry and doubt (Gellius 1927, 121-232). With regard to its origin, the term skepticism is derived from the Greek word σκεπτικός (*skeptikós*), which means looking at closely, considering, or examining. Cicero applied these methods or principles in most of his works. Most notably, after presenting all the arguments supporting and opposing divination, he states:

...it is characteristic of the Academy to put forward no conclusions of its own, but to approve those which seem to approach nearest to the truth; to compare arguments; to draw forth all that may be said [on] behalf of any opinion; and, without asserting any authority of its own, to leave the judgment of the inquirer wholly free (Cicero 1923, 539).

There are four points in the above passage that are worthy of emphasis. The first is “no conclusion,” which pertains to the uncertainty or unknowability of things. This point also explains why the principle and method of inquiry or examination are at the very core of the Academy, i.e., even though the ultimate truth cannot be established, it is still possible to approach things through inquiry or examination. The second point is the “comparison of arguments.” It is the objective of inquiry or examination to reveal the contradictions as well as the strengths and limitations of both sides of arguments. Here, it may appear that the arguments are not resolvable because they cannot be known with certainty, but this does not mean that judgments or proximate conclusions are not possible. It is instead the point of judgment, inquiry or examination, and comparison of arguments to determine what is “nearest to the truth,” which is the third point. Finally, the “judgment of the inquirer [is] wholly free.” Safeguarding the freedom to judge or think is the value upheld by the Academy in its rivalry against the dogmatic schools of thought during the Hellenistic period, namely Stoicism and Epicureanism. While the dogmatists claim that they have discovered and can provide ultimate truths, the Academy urges people to think and not merely rely on the truths provided.

Remarkably, Cicero regarded theoretical study as a moral concern. In his work *De Officiis* (On Duties), he states that “to be drawn by study away from active life is contrary to moral duty” (Cicero, 1913, 21).³ Cicero's discourse of divination—namely, his philosophical critique and defense of the topic—is an example that he truly associated his theoretical study with the concerns of active life (Santangelo 2013). After all, divination requires a robust and sophisticated theoretical or conceptual

foundation, given its crucial role in the active life of political, religious, and private affairs.

Arguably, the above discussion suggests that Cicero's philosophical ruminations, including his divination critique, are corrective and transformative. He points out that it is imperative to rethink the elements of their religion and practices because false or erroneous thoughts about it may either be regarded as a crime against the gods or be identified as a form of superstition (Cicero 1923, 231). Cicero (1933, 3) also claims that his "inquiry into the nature of the gods [is] fundamentally important for the regulation of the religion." These instances prove that he is concerned with the active life, and he aimed at rectifying what constituted as erroneous and superstitious in order for his politico-religious community to be transformed accordingly, i.e., devoid of error and superstition.

Wang Chong as an Independent Thinker

A number of scholars described Wang Chong as a heterodox thinker, eclectic, skeptic, and even an iconoclast (Forke 1907, 1; Creel 1953, 183-185; Fung Yu-lan 1948, 210). These descriptions point to the fact that he is a relatively independent thinker, which means that he did not strictly adhere to one prominent school of thought during his time, either Confucianism or Daoism. Such independence allowed him to assert his style, and he likewise had more liberty to criticize various issues, including divination.

The style of Wang Chong can be summed up in two words: simplicity and voluminous. Simplicity refers to his choice of words so that he may be lucid as possible. He argues that "[t]o use high-flown expressions [...] instead of the plain and simple language of the people is like mixing an elixir, as the spirits use, to cure a cold or cough, and to put on a fur-coat of sable or fox to fetch firewood or vegetables" (Wang Chong 1907, 69). It is implied here that Wang Chong intended his work to be accessed by the majority and not just limit it to a specific group of people such as the educated or leaders of the society. It is also evident in the passage above, and this is true in various instances throughout his work, that one of his strategies to keep his language simple is using analogies. This is helpful for him as a writer and for his general readers.

With regard to being voluminous, he explained this style by comparing it to the proportionality or sufficiency of ground in building houses—i.e., a lesser number of house structures demands a small size of ground while a greater number of house structures demands a larger size of the ground. Wang Chong noted that there must also be proportionality between the number of words and the errors being addressed. This is to say that his work cannot be concise because "errors are so many, that the words necessary to point out the truth, show what is right, and controvert what is false, cannot well be brief and succinct" (Wang Chong 1907, 77).

Wang Chong's independence as a thinker is also manifest in how he discussed truth in two instances. First, he states, "in arguing, the essential thing is truth, not elegance, that the facts should at all events be correct, and that consensus is not the highest aim" (Wang Chong 1907, 73). On the one hand, this is his response to the issue

of giving importance to public feeling in literature, which is contrary to his style and aim. On the other hand, this passage reiterates that *argumentum ad populum*, or the appeal to popularity, is a flawed means of constructing arguments. Here, Wang Chong also seems to imply the importance of being different due to his independence as a thinker. This means there are certain times when being different is necessary because consensus or being in accord with the majority does not always help in establishing the truth.

Second, he states, “truth and reality are drowned in a flood of inventions and fabrications. Can we remain silent when our heart swells to overflowing, and the pencil trembles in our hand?” (Wang Chong 1907, 89). This instance implies the role of humans in relation to truth. While humans can manipulate truth as in inventions and fabrications, they also have the capacity to rectify it. In this regard, a critical attitude may be regarded as constitutive of one’s moral duty. In Confucianism, the virtue of 義 *Yi* suggests a natural moral force that exists within human beings (Co 2005, 108). Perhaps, this moral force is evident in Wang Chong’s effort to point out the false or the wrong for people to know. In other words, he did not remain silent; instead, he put his thoughts into writing for public benefit because he recognized that this was within his moral capacity.

It is widely accepted that Wang Chong is a key figure in determining the first stirrings of critical thought in China (McLeod 2018, 2). The title of his major and extant work, the *Lunheng*, already implies critique. It means the judgment, measurement, or weighing of statements and discourses. As such, the title has been translated as *Disquisitions*, *Balanced Discourses*, *Balanced Inquiries*, or *Critical Essays* (Forke 1907, 9; Ren Milin 2018, 175-180; Chan 1963, 293; Fung Yu-lan 1948, 210). Wang Chong was also explicit about his aim/s, which is arguably analogous to the ancient Greek understanding of critique as a decision in the sense of reaching a verdict or judgment. He states that his work is “intended to explain the common errors [as well as] elucidate the right and wrong principles so the future generations can clearly see the difference between truth and falsehood!” (Wang Chong 1907, 88). Furthermore, in another instance, he states that “the *Lunheng* weighs the words, whether they be light or heavy, and holds up a balance for truth and falsehood” (Wang Chong 1907, 85). These passages affirm that Wang Chong aims to set an example of how to make a judgment to distinguish truth from falsity. The *Lunheng* also aims to be corrective and transformative. In being corrective, this work sets an example of how to distinguish what is true from false. And the quality of being transformative is evident in Wang Chong’s encouragement of the public to be critical to set an example for future generations. Unfortunately, due to his difference and independence as a thinker, Wang Chong was not given as much attention as his thought deserved (Ren Milin 2018, 179). However, even if this is the case, this does not mean that his work can no longer be considered a valuable source.

CICERO AND HIS CRITIQUE OF DIVINATION

Cicero’s critique of divination contains strong politico-religious significance since such practice is part of the Roman religion (Cicero 1933, 289-291). The Book I

of *De Divinatione* is predominantly an exposition of the Stoic view of divination. In Book II, Cicero was critical of this view and even considered it superstitious. His goal is to annihilate superstition, and he was also clear and cautious that this goal is not tantamount to the destruction of religion (Cicero 1923, 483). In the Ciceronian context, religion comes from the Latin term *relegere*, which is to retrace or re-read; it involves *legere*, which refers to picking out or discernment (Cicero 1933, 193). Religion differs from superstition, which focuses on repetition (Salzman 1987, 173-175). As Cicero (1933, 193) describes, “persons [...] spent whole days in prayer and sacrifice to ensure that their children should outlive [and they] were termed ‘superstitious’ (from *superstes*, a survivor).” It suggests that superstition—being characterized by prayer (perhaps in the form of relentless chanting) and sacrifice—can cause blind obedience and undermines the crucial role of understanding present in religion, as in retracing or re-reading. Here, we then learn that being truly religious entails understanding the principles or elements of religion.

One problem concerning divination in Roman society is the rise and proliferation of quack diviners, or those who do it mainly for money (Cicero 1923, 369). This problem or situation has affected the status of divination in society and how people view such practice. In addition to this problem, I describe Cicero’s critique of divination under three headings, clarifying why such practice turned out superstitious.

Pragmatic Criticism/ Impracticality of Divination

The rise of various specialists threatened the role of the diviners in society. Some specialists include physicians, musicians, mathematicians, philosophers, sages, physicists, and logicians, and some are knowledgeable on statecraft (Cicero 1923, 379-383). They are credible and superior because they can provide a detailed and coherent explanation of their crafts. In contrast, this was not provided by divination which was too complex to be explained and understood. The defense of divination in Book I of *De Divinatione* significantly cited historical occurrences and results to demonstrate its efficacy, but it failed to provide a robust discussion with regard to its causes (Cicero 1923, 383). This argumentation or defense refers to “*eventa, non causae* (outcomes, not causes),” which suggests the primacy of results over causes (Cicero 1923, 383, 387, 469, 513-515; Schofield 1986, 51). As Quintus states: “I am content[ed] with my knowledge that it does, although I may not know why” (Cicero 1923, 387).

Take, for instance, the difference between dream diviners and physicians. In the ancient Greek medical tradition, induced sleep and dreams are parts of the healing process performed in the temple of Asclepius, also known as *enkoimesis* (Askitopoulou 2015, 72). It is believed that during sleep, patients will receive signs from gods in the form of dreams which the priest or healer will interpret. In the Hippocratic corpus, there is a distinction between dreams given by the gods and dreams derived from the soul—the former as signs of the future, and the latter indicates bodily states (Chadwick & Mann 1983, 514). This distinction aimed to provide a more naturalistic explanation of dreams and their connection to health and sickness. Besides, it introduced dreams as factors for prognosis and diagnosis (Askitopoulou 2015, 73).

However, the same Hippocratic writing also warned that the interpreters of dreams (or Hippocratic physicians) are still prone to errors and advised their patients to seek help from the gods through prayers (Chadwick & Mann 1983, 514). The term physician is particular to a certain context. Although these interpreters of dreams were considered Hippocratic physicians, Cicero doubted the validity of their craft. In other words, Cicero would not consider them physicians because they still tend to appeal to the gods and prayers in their operations (Cicero 1923, 387 and 509; Cicero 1933 301).

Another instance that shows the impracticality of divination is the concern about the future as fated. Cicero maintained that it is a disadvantage to know it since there is nothing within the scope of humans to alter fated matters. He also refers to Dicaearchus, a Greek thinker and a student of Aristotle, who wrote about the possibility of prophecy and the benefit of not knowing the future (Cicero 1923, 393 and 409; Roberts 2007). Besides, there are psychological disadvantages to knowing the future as fated. On the one hand, if the future is unfortunate, it is possible to feel miserable in the course of waiting and be distressed about not being able to act upon it since it is unalterable (Cicero 1933, 299; Po-chia Hsia 2016, 113). On the other hand, if the future is fortunate, it is possible to feel extreme excitement or experience a state of boredom since the future has already been foretold. In both cases, there is the danger of not being able to live genuinely in the present since the knowledge of the future has the power to interrupt the present.

Conversely, there is an advantage of knowing the inevitable future where this knowledge assists in preparing for it (Denyer 1985, 2). Although the future is fated, preparation is still within the scope of human control. However, preparing for the inevitable future may still interrupt the present, and this challenges humans in how they relate to this knowledge of the future. Hence, if the future is fated where there is no means to alter it and the knowledge of it can cause psychological disadvantages and interruptions in the present, then divination as a means to acquire such knowledge is impractical.

On the Inconsistency of Divination

Cicero pointed out that inconsistency or non-uniformity is a crucial factor affecting the credibility and reliability of divination. This means that such practice is arbitrarily done and does not have a genuine method. A case in point is haruspicy, where diviners from various nations interpret entrails differently (Cicero 1923, 401-403). Inconsistency is also evident in augury. Although Cicero himself was an augur, this did not hinder him from expressing his criticism toward it. He mentions how the augurs differ in various aspects—the way they proceed with their observations, the birds they observe, and their interpretations of the signs and movements of the birds (Cicero 1923, 465).

Astrology was also doubted, not because of the inconsistent practitioners or astrologers, but of the inconsistent results. While the inconsistency may also spring from the astrologers since they are the interpreters, Cicero asserted clear evidence that the results are inconsistent. He states, “the fact that [humans] who were born at the very same instant are unlike in character, career, and in destiny, makes it very clear

that the time of birth has nothing to do in determining [hu]man's course in life" (Cicero 1923, 479).

Moreover, the issue of inconsistency is closely associated with the idea of difference. In other words, there is inconsistency because of the differences among practitioners, the results, or within the system itself. Although inconsistency or difference was considered a weakness or an object of criticism, this can also be a point of interest since it affirms peculiarities that may reveal essential ideas. For example, this idea of difference is at the core of one study of divination, which states, "a divination system is often the primarily institutional means of articulating the epistemology of a people" (Peek 1991, 2). Indeed, while divination is universal, as Cicero affirmed, it has corresponding or particular expressions.

The Incoherence of the Fundamental Concepts of Divination

Cicero also criticized the incoherence among some of the fundamental concepts of divination—namely, chance and fate. This criticism attacks the very core of divination since it reveals the flaws and weaknesses of its foundation. However, this does not mean that Cicero aimed to destroy divination. After all, he recognized that it was part of the Roman religion, and this criticism is rather consistent with his aim to eliminate superstition.

Chance, in Latin: *fors*, refers to events or incidents that are rare, uncertain, or unpredictable. This fundamental concept was criticized as incoherent to divination in two instances. The first instance pertains to chance as its object, wherein Quintus defines divination as "the foreseeing and foretelling of events considered as happening by chance" (Cicero 1923, 233). Cicero (1923, 385) notes that there is overlap since those that happen by chance are also within the scope of other crafts. What is suggested here is that the incorporation of the concept of chance weakened divination because it is also the object of other crafts which have developed a certain sense of consistency, uniformity, or method and their specialists were able to advance coherent explanations. Divination, in contrast, lacked these aspects, which threatened its displacement as a foremost practice.

The second instance concerns the intelligibility of chance, making foreknowledge in divination possible. Here, Cicero affirmed the possibility of chance but doubted whether it could be foreknown through divination. In the above discussion, chance was identified as the object of both divination and other crafts. There seems to be no doubt in the case of other crafts regarding the intelligibility of chance as their object since they employ reason in their process. In contrast, Cicero (1923, 385) notes that the "divination of 'things that happen by chance' is possible only of things which cannot be foreseen by means of skill or wisdom." There are then two ways of knowing events that happen by chance—i.e., through divination which employs means other than reason, skill, or wisdom, and through the employment of reason in the case of other crafts. However, the more effective and valid approach is by means of the latter or the employment of reason. Although this is the case, Cicero was aware that the other crafts are still prone to error, which intensified his doubt against divination. He argues

that if the specialists who rely on accurate reasoning are prone to error, then it is impossible not to doubt the conjectures made by divination (Cicero 1923, 387).

Another fundamental concept in the theory of divination is fate, in Latin: *fatum*. It is the immortal truth about the succession of events, and it implies that “nothing has happened which was not bound to happen, and, likewise, nothing is going to happen which will not find in nature every efficient cause of its happening” (Cicero 1923, 359-361). It is said that the causes or signs of these fated events are foreseen through the natural forms of divination. Moreover, there are two instances where fate was criticized as incoherent. The first instance pertains to its association with the concept of chance. Here, Cicero (1923, 391) explains that fate contrasts with chance, i.e., while the former suggests that events and things are determined from eternity, the latter indicates uncertainties and other possibilities. In addition, chance makes divination possible while fate does not, given that such practice deals with things that happen by chance, as per Quintus’s definition (Cicero 1923, 233). These contrasting points, in summary, imply that these two concepts are incoherent and cannot be associated with divination at the same time.

The second instance concerns fate and the possibility of human influence. Here, Cicero (1923, 391) refers to the belief that there are human factors—namely, obedience to auspices, offering, or sacrifice—which can influence fated events, contrary to the very concept of fate. This belief undermines fate since it presupposes that these events are not true from the standpoint of eternity because humans may influence its prevention or happening. From this perspective, Cicero (1923, 391) asserts that if fated events can be influenced by human means, then fate is meaningless.

In *De Divinatione*, where the preceding discussion is primarily based, fate was considered a concept of physics which means that it is a key element in understanding the universe. It suggests a predetermined pattern that unfolds in time. In his other work, *De Fato*, Cicero discusses it in a different yet related manner where fate emerged as a practical concept containing ethical and political significance (Begemann 2014, 244; Henry 1927, 42). Arguably, Cicero followed a compatibilist approach to safeguard the freedom of the human will in relation to fate. This means that not everything is reducible to fate, and not every human act is a consequence of the freedom of his will (*voluntas*) since he may also act according to his propensities (*propensiores*) (Cicero 1942, 203 and 217). Furthermore, it is crucial that fate presents a dimension beyond human control. Concerning whether fate or chance is the object of divination, what is certain is that divination is foreseeing what is beyond human control.

WANG CHONG AND HIS CRITIQUE OF DIVINATION

Divination is a crucial component of Chinese society, politics, culture, ritual, and myth (Smith 1991, 13). Arguably, for Wang Chong to criticize such a topic, he must be different and independent in his thinking. The prominence of Confucianism during his time may have either hindered or motivated his critique. As a hindrance, the Confucian reverence for the old and tradition may not tolerate his critique since divination is a crucial part of their society. As motivation, we again refer to the Confucian virtue of *Yi* or the natural moral force that exists within human beings. This

is reflected in Wang Chong's effort to point out the false or the wrong. He did not remain silent; instead, he put his thoughts into writing for public benefit because he recognized that this was within his moral capacity.

The predominant theme of Wang Chong's critique of divination pertains to the diviners and the people who subscribe to it. He describes the negative consequence in their lives since these people developed blind reliance on the practice—"they disregard the advice of their friends, and [rely only upon] divination, they neglect what is right and wrong, and trust solely to lucky and unlucky portents" (Wang Chong 1907, 182). This means that these people embraced mediocrity and ignored their ability to decide for themselves. Regarding the diviners, Wang Chong (1907, 190) was straightforward in saying that their fault lies in the fact that they do not know their business. In addition, I discuss Wang Chong's other criticisms of divination under three headings, clarifying why such practice emerged as negative or erroneous.

The Unnecessary Role of Divination

Wang Chong (1962, 104) remarks, "though, of no great importance, these arts are also derived from the sages, which has often been overlooked." Here, arts pertain to the ancient forms of divination, such as the use of bones of animals and milfoil stalks. On the one hand, Wang Chong emphasizes the vital role of the sages in the institution of divination. The Literati even viewed the sages as supernatural and compared them to divinatory devices such as milfoil stalks and dried shells of tortoises which are likewise considered supernatural. This view, however, is one of Wang Chong's points of divergence from the Literati since he considers the sages superior but not supernatural (Wang Chong 1962, 117). On the other hand, in that same remark, he also suggests the decline of divination, which explains its diminished importance and why it has been overlooked. This point further refers to Wang Chong's criticism about the unnecessary role of divination, which is articulated in his view of the Han Dynasty as a period of universal peace (太平 *taiping*).

Wang Chong also differed from the view of the Literati that the Han period is inferior compared to the earlier time of the Five Emperors and the Three Rulers. This view stems from the presupposition that sages and omens are the standards of universal peace that were claimed to be found in the earlier period but were non-existent during the Han. In other words, Han does not qualify as a period of universal peace because no sages and omens were similar to the earlier period (Wang Chong 1962, 192). Since this view emphasizes the standards and how they manifest in the past, it fails to consider the peculiar circumstances of a particular period which may also characterize universal peace.

Wang Chong repudiated the reasoning of the Literati. He explains that the problem with their view is their inadequate understanding of the nature of sages and omens and their misconception of universal peace (Wang Chong, 1962, 195-196). Regarding the sages, it is an exaggeration that the Literati viewed them as supernatural and extremely distant from humans (Wang Chong 1962, 114-128, 200). Wang Chong refutes this view by describing that the knowledge obtained by the sages is not

supernatural or extraordinary and may also be knowable by others. In effect, this quality of knowledge provided a means for Wang Chong to suggest that sages are not supernatural since knowledge is non-discriminatory or not intended for a particular knower. However, Wang Chong (1962, 128) still considers the sages superior in obtaining knowledge due to their disposition and training. With regard to omens, it is a problem that the Literati standardized them. They argued that omens of the earlier time, such as the appearance of the phoenix and the Plan of the River, must appear again in the later time to indicate a period of universal peace. Wang Chong (1962, 226) opposes this view and reasons that omens are strange or unusual and may not be identical. Succinctly, it is not the case that sages and omens did not exist or were not present during the Han period; the real issue is that they were not properly understood or identified.

Sages are important in Wang Chong's view of universal peace. They are the only means, the necessary and sufficient condition, to achieve such a state (Puett 2005/2006, 274). For this reason, omens should not be regarded as one of the causes of universal peace, which the Literati claim. In Wang Chong's discourse, omens are reduced to mere dispensable signs. He explains that what is essential is the willingness of the sage ruler to bring forth the state of being at peace and ease and that the absence of omens is not detrimental to universal peace (Wang Chong 1962, 192-193).

It is important to note that Wang Chong's aim is neither to deny omens nor divination in general, but he intends to show that it is unnecessary. In the context of the present discussion, this means that although omens and other unusual creatures did not appear or may have occurred differently, the Han period may still be considered a period of universal peace and is not inferior to the earlier time. On another note, while this is a criticism about the unnecessary role of divination, this also alludes to the problems stemming from how humans appropriate or relate to such practice, which I discuss in the next section. For instance, I refer to the problems of over-reliance, misinterpretation, and blind obedience to divination. These explain why divination overshadowed other aspects of human life, such as thinking, the regard for friendship, and the issue of listening to sages which is vital in achieving universal peace.

The Human Problem: Epistemological and Psychological

Wang Chong (1907, 187) boldly states, "there are many people discoursing on divination, but very few who understand its real meaning." This statement affirms the complexity of such practice and its widespread influence, and it implies diverse problems stemming from the faulty understanding of humans regarding divination. Based on Wang Chong's writings, I propose to label these problems as epistemological since it pertains to the human limitation in knowing the possible objects of divination and psychological since it concerns how humans deal with such practice.

It has been pointed out in the preceding part that Wang Chong's aim was not to deny the possibility of omens. As he mentions, "omens [are] perfectly correct, but human knowledge is insufficient, and the reasoning therefore not to the point" (Wang Chong 1907, 189). This passage suggests the limitation of human knowledge in interpreting omens. However, this should not be exclusively focused on humans as the

knower but must also consider the very nature of omens which is the object of knowledge in this particular instance. Omens are essentially unusual, extraordinary, and marvelous—these are the very reasons why humans and even diviners end up wrong in their interpretation. Besides, it is common for humans to look for regularity or pattern, which is the case for most natural processes such as the sun’s rising and setting, the change of seasons, the phases of the moon, etc. This may explain the problem raised in the preceding part, where they standardized omens, which is why they associated omens with some pattern or regularity. In doing so, they failed to understand that “these signs must not, of necessity, be identical with former ones” (Wang Chong 1962, 226).

Arguably, the limitation of human knowledge in divination had psychological repercussions, manifested in how humans deal with such practice or their way of living. Take, for instance, the case of divination by milfoil and shells of tortoises. Wang Chong criticizes the misappropriation and misuse of these divinatory tools. In particular, humans ascribed their qualities to these tools in their understanding of divination, its validity, and efficacy. Wang Chong disagrees by pointing out the disparity between these tools and how they were misused. For instance, he says:

Heaven and Earth are both alive, and milfoil and tortoises are dead. How could we elicit a reply by asking the living through the dead? The shell of a dried tortoise and the stalk of a withered weed are supposed to question living Heaven and Earth! (Wang Chong 1907, 184)

There is a long history of using milfoil and shells of tortoises as divinatory tools (Smith 1991, 14-24). Wang Chong (1907, 182) refers to Confucius, who noted their meanings, i.e., milfoil means old, and tortoise means aged. These meanings explain why they were employed in such practice. Since it is customary for humans to consult with the old or the aged regarding huge decisions in life, the milfoil and the tortoise represent them in the consultation that happens in divination. This, however, resulted in the misappropriation and misuse of these tools, which were even considered spiritual entities. The point here is that milfoil and tortoises do not have the power to relay the questions raised during divination.

Wang Chong also criticized the over-reliance of humans on divination. He observes that humans have relied on such practice even to the extent that they disregarded their friends, affecting their moral sensibility (Wang Chong 1907, 182-183). It seems that what is important is that they follow signs or portents at all costs. Despite this criticism, Wang Chong does not suggest the entire eradication of such practice, but he intends to show here that it has been excessively used by humans, which negatively impacted their manner of living. Perhaps, there must only be moments when it is acceptable to rely on divination. The state, for instance, can regulate the operation of diviners. This was the case in both early Chinese and ancient Greco-Roman traditions, given the role of divination in their political landscape (Raphals 2013, 177-278).

Due to their over-reliance on divination, humans developed a sense of mediocrity or a lazy attitude toward life, where the only option for them is to anticipate signs of what will happen. Some have also presumed that what will happen is fated and immutable, so there is no point in acting on it. Humans have likewise failed to live authentically since they can no longer decide for themselves. They lacked accountability and simply relied on other else for their decisions.

Against the Anthropomorphized Heaven

The Heaven (天 *Tian*) is a significant concept in Chinese thought that informed some of their beliefs and practices. Concerning its history, this concept was used to refer to three things, namely, nature, universal and moral law, and a spiritual being with will and the governor of the universe (*Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture 1*, 2015, 74; Wang *et al.* 2020, 31). The last-mentioned usage is anthropomorphized, i.e., human qualities were ascribed to Heaven. This very usage likewise emerged as a fundamental principle of divination since it is presupposed that Heaven sends messages—expressed in a medium other than human language—to humans.

One of Wang Chong's criticisms of divination pertains to the anthropomorphized Heaven. This is evident in his observation that humans, "in their belief, Heaven and Earth really make their wishes known, and weeds and tortoises verily possess spiritual powers" (Wang Chong 1907, 182). He counters this belief in his analysis of the concept of spontaneity (自然 *ziran*) as the transformation of the vital fluid (氣 *qi*, or *qi*-transformation) (Wang *et al.* 2020, 234). This counterargument is expressed in the following.

When Heaven is moving, it does not desire to produce things thereby, but things are produced of their own accord. That is spontaneity. Letting out its fluid, it does not desire to create things, but things are created of themselves. That is inaction. But how is the fluid of Heaven, which we credit with spontaneity and inaction? It is placid, tranquil, desireless, inactive, and unbusied. (Wang Chong 1907, 93)

The assertion that Heaven is without purpose and desire is tantamount to saying that it is indifferent or disinterested in human affairs. Wang Chong supports this by explaining the origin or the fundamental source of things, the spontaneous emission of the vital fluid that triggered its own transformation and further caused the creation of things or forms of life. This further suggests that no special reason or particular care is intended for creating humans and other things because all are merely consequences of the spontaneous emission of the vital fluid. Wang Chong (1907, 92-93) also mentions that Heaven is devoid of qualities that make purpose and desire possible, i.e., the corporeality and sensory organs of humans. This means that Heaven cannot respond to human queries and wishes, which is thought possible in divination by milfoil and tortoises.

Wang Chong also criticized the wrong views about natural occurrences. It was a common understanding that when lightning killed a man, it was because of his hidden faults, and the deep rolling sound of thunder is a manifestation of Heaven's anger, akin to the gasping and breathing of humans when they are angry. Wang Chong (1907, 285-295) considers these as exaggerations. He provides five naturalistic arguments to show that thunder is fire, devoid of any supernatural causes or agents, and has nothing to do with the anger of Heaven. Remarkably, his rejection of the anthropomorphized conception of Heaven honed his naturalistic explanation of things and events, which is why he is appreciated in the development of science in China (Needham & Wang 1956, 368; Hu Shih 2012, 282).

CONCLUSION

Despite the differences between these thinkers with regard to their philosophical backgrounds and methods, they are indeed similar in terms of being critical which is a sterling indication of their aim to rectify the false and inadequate beliefs of their time, as well as to transform the way of thinking of their people. Divination stood as a common theme of their critique since the magnitude of attention they ascribed to such practice is commensurate to the roles it played in their individual, social, political, and religious lives.

It is the intention of Cicero to preserve the fundamental teachings of their forefathers. This is likewise a means for him to avoid the accusation of being impious. He esteemed their old teachings, and to a certain extent, he took them as his vantage point to assess the right and wrong views or practices of his time. This is not to say, however, that Cicero fully undermined the present since he was also preoccupied with the politico-religious issues of his own time. His intention to introduce philosophy to the Romans is another proof that he did not merely want to adhere to the past. His commitment to the present and the introduction or adoption of new teachings were cautiously taken so they would not be detrimental to the teachings of their forefathers. Cicero attacked the Stoic view of divination (or some aspects of it) since it was superstitious, which means it was against the religion of the Roman people that their forefathers instituted.

The critical attitude of Wang Chong is geared towards criticizing the old, their classic books, and even their traditions. This is because he identified the problem of his own time as the excessive adherence or blind loyalty of the people with regard to the past, which resulted in their complacency or not being critical of anything about the past. However, this does not mean that Wang Chong completely undermined the past. It is evident that he still subscribed to the ideas of the past and appropriated their concepts, but with the intention to provide a new interpretation and cleanse or purify them from false or inadequate understanding.

These contrasting critical attitudes of the two thinkers, incomparable as they may be, are both valuable. Cicero taught us the importance of paying attention to the past and maintaining what can still be relevant in the present time. Wang Chong taught us that criticism escapes the question of ethics, i.e., criticizing the old does not

necessarily imply disrespect or the disregard of the old since the aim is truth or clarity of thinking. If we exclusively focus on either of the two, it might spell failure. We cannot simply proceed from the old ways, for we may repeat the same mistakes as what already happened in the past, and we cannot merely criticize the old as if it does not bring us any good.

NOTES

1. Cicero wrote two books or volumes with regard to this topic and titled *De Divinatione* (On Divination), which is part of his religious trilogy, the other books being *De Natura Deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods) and *De Fato* (On Fate). For Wang Chong, divination figured as an important topic in various chapters of his work titled as the 論衡 *Lunheng*.

2. It is often distinguished from Pyrrhonian Skepticism (also referred to as Pyrrhonism or Skepticism). Determining the similarities and differences between the Academy and Pyrrhonism is an old issue that already concerned the Greek writers, and was further reconsidered by the Romans like Aulus Gellius (ca 125 CE —180 CE).

3. In a recent work, Levy (2012) translated this passage in the following: “It is against duty that one’s studies should divert one from the management of public affairs.”

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