


5-2016

The Principle of Dong Zhongshu's Omen Discourse and Wang Chong's Criticism of Heaven's Reprimand in the Chapter "Qian Gao"

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The Principle of Dong Zhongshu's Omen Discourse and Wang Chong's Criticism of Heaven's Reprimand
in the Chapter "Qian Gao" 讖告

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

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Abstract

Omen discourse, the investigation of aberrant natural disasters and miraculous celestial phenomena, provided a sophisticated ideological model that could be exploited to expostulate with the sovereign for his transgressions, and to denounce the misgovernment of the imperial bureaucracy. The first of this political model is the personification of the supreme Heaven and the elevation of Heaven's status. From the perspective of ru 儒 (Confucians) scholars, the establishment of Heaven's supreme authority upon the human realm and the restriction of the sovereign in power guarantee the rectification of political mistakes as well as an applicable way for ru scholars to actively participate in real politics at court. The rise of omen discourse in the Western Han dynasty 西漢 (202 BCE - 8 AD) unveils the development of a significant political theory that aimed at checking the absolute power of the sovereign through Heaven's reprimand. However, its theoretical efficacy is questioned by Wang Chong 王充 (27 - 97 AD) in the chapter "Qian Gao" 讖告 in his monograph *Balanced Argument* (*Lun Heng* 論衡). The focal point of this paper is the intrinsic logic of Wang Chong's arguments in his radical rejection of the philosophical ideas of the Han omen discourse. By indicating the false methodology of the principle of Heaven's reprimand, not only had Wang Chong thoroughly repudiated the Confucian model for punishing, as well as admonishing, the sovereign's misconduct in politics, but also he undermined the active nature of Heaven as an anthropomorphic deity, eventually reverting to the initiatives of the sages and worthies in the mundane world.

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Acknowledgement

Special thanks are extended to the committee members for all of their help with my thesis. It would be impossible to make it through the semester without their help.

Also, a special thanks goes out to the faculty and staff in the history department for their help.

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Introduction

The present research of this thesis focuses on the questions regarding Confucian omen discourse 災異說 during the Western Han dynasty, its sociopolitical implications, and its influence and impact on Chinese Han politics. It will further examine Wang Chong's criticism of omen discourse in the chapter "Qian Gao" 讞告 in *Balanced Argument* 論衡. Omen discourse has long been thought as one of the most important Han political theories invented by the Confucian scholars. Early in the commencement of the Western Han dynasty 西漢 (202 BCE - 8 AD), the basic principles of omen discourse had been established by prominent ru 儒 (Confucians) scholars. Take, for instance, Lu Jia 陸賈 who laid a theoretical foundation for the later Dong Zhongshu's 董仲舒 omen discourse during the reign of Emperor Wudi 漢武帝 (141 - 87 BCE). According to Lu Jia's theory, omens, both auspicious and ominous, are the messages from Heaven-as the supreme moral authority-to the ruler, as the sole agent of Heaven in the mundane world. If the ruler's conduct violates the moral way of Heaven and then results in misgovernment, evil Qi 氣 (the concept "Qi" could be rendered as dynamic energy or vigorous vapor) would generate, which would inevitably give birth to disasters as omens. Lu Jia's emphasis is on the active nature of the sovereign, who has a decisive effect on the decline of the whole human society.

Later, during the reign of Emperor Wudi, it is Dong Zhongshu, another Confucian scholar who eventually systemized the Han omen discourse, making it a prevailing political theory throughout Han imperial history. Long been credited as the founding father of Western Han Confucianism, Dong Zhongshu inherited the early Han Confucian ideas with regard to moral cosmology and omen theory. He also further developed a series of political theories and cosmological concepts from both before and during his time, such as the theory of Yin-yang 陰陽 and Five Elements 五行, the idea of the Mandate of Heaven 天命觀, and the system of the correspondence between Heaven and human beings 天人感應. By integrating these philosophical, as well as political ideas as a whole into a highly developed moral cosmology of Heaven, Dong Zhongshu set forth his omen discourse in the book *Luxuriant Dew of the*

Annals (Chun Qiu Fan Lu 春秋繁露).¹ The content of Dong's omen discourse could be generally summarized as below:

天地之物，有不常之變者，謂之異，小者謂之災，災常先至，而異乃隨之，災者，天之譴也，異者，天之威也，譴之而不知，乃畏之以威，詩雲：“畏天之威。”殆此謂也。凡災異之本，盡生于國家之失，國家之失乃始萌芽，而天出災害以譴告之；譴告之，而不知變，乃見怪異以驚駭之；驚駭之，尚不知畏恐，其殃咎乃至。以此見天意之仁，而不欲陷人也。²

Among substances between the heaven and the earth, there are abnormal changes, which are considered to be anomalies. In contrast to anomalies, the lesser ones are recognized as disasters. It is disasters that regularly occur first, followed by anomalies. Disasters are reprimands from Heaven while anomalies are Heaven's intimidation. If the sovereign still had not realized his faults after Heaven reprimanded him, Heaven would frighten him with awe. This is what the poem says: "to regard Heaven with reverence for its prestige." The misgovernment of the state is utterly at the root of disasters and anomalies. When the signs of misgovernment begin to appear, Heaven would warn, as well as reprimand, the sovereign through disasters and calamities; still being unaware of necessity for changes and reforms, oddities and aberrant phenomena would appear in order to frighten him; if the sovereign has not yet been scared of Heaven, misfortune thus would befall him. It is Heaven, with benevolent will and intention that is unwilling to circumvent human beings.

Dong Zhongshu considered abnormal changes of substances between the heaven and the earth to be omens, which are roughly divided into two categories on account of their grade and chronological sequence. The lesser one that occurs first is disaster; the greater one that always follows the disaster is anomaly. Dong ascribes the appearance of both disasters and anomalies entirely to the ruler's transgressive conduct and the mismanaged bureaucratic administration of the state. He further explains that Heaven would send down disasters into the human realm in advance of misgovernment in purpose of warning the ruler. If the ruler does not realize Heaven's admonition and refuses to rectify the misgovernment, Heaven would inspire the ruler with awe by means of aberrant events. If the ruler is still not scared of Heaven's wrath, misfortunes and calamities would befall him.

¹ Lippiello explains though *Chun Qiu Fan Lu* is traditionally attributed to Dong Zhongshu, it is basically a composite book by Dong and the scholars who coopted Dong's Confucian thought. See Tiziana Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China: Han, Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties* (Germany, 2001), 26. Loewe designates that although the extent to which the texts stems from Dong Zhongshu himself remains questionable, these texts in *Chun Qiu Fan Lu* are quoted constantly for Dong's dependence on the *Gongyang zhuan* (公羊傳) and his explanation of history. See Michael Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu, a Confucian Heritage and the "Chunqiu fanlu"*, (Leiden and Boston, 2011), 155.

² Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, *Chunqiu fanlu zhu zi suoyin 春秋繁露逐字索引* [A Concordance to the "Chunqiu fanlu"], (eds.) D. C. Lau and Chen Fangzheng 陳方正 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1994), 8.4/40/26.

In *The History of Western Han (Han Shu 漢書)*, the specific reasons for the appearance of omens are articulated:

廢德教而任刑罰，刑罰不中則生邪氣。邪氣積于下，怨惡畜于上，上下不和，則陰陽繆決，而妖孽生矣，此災異所緣而起也。³

Abolishing virtuous education, while abusing punishment, when the legal punishments are not implemented properly would give birth to the evil Qi. Once the evil Qi accumulates at the lower part, while enmity and ferocity accumulates at the upper part, the harmony of the two parts would be broken, and therefore disturb the balance between Yin and Yang, leading to the emergence of evil spirits. This is the reason for the appearance of omens.

From the above, according to Dong Zhongshu, when both the sovereign and the government began to abuse penalty and neglect edification of ethics and morality, the evil Qi would generate, as well as cause, the emergence of evil and crime.

³ *The History of the Western Han (漢書·董仲舒傳)*.

Omen Politics: The Main Stream of Understanding

When referring to disasters, they are usually catastrophic events occurring in the terrestrial sphere, such as flood, drought, earthquakes, and invasions of locusts. Anomalies, by contrast, are those aberrant cosmological phenomena appearing in the celestial sphere, for instance, solar eclipses, falling meteorites, the emergence of comets, conjunction of planets, etc.⁴ Yu Zhiping in his paper explicitly describes the distinction of chronological sequence between disasters and anomalies and their causal relationship. According to his explanations, disasters always happens prior to anomalies as a well-intentioned warning from Heaven to the sovereign. Anomalies, if the sovereign had not realized Heaven's displeasure and dissatisfaction, would appear, taking on an implication of reprimand. In short, the onset of disasters usually grew out of the ruler's misdeeds, while anomalies were caused by severe mistakes.⁵ In fact, either disasters or anomalies are supposed to be a natural consequence, deriving from the circulation of all natural substances and the universe's movement, which to a certain extent must have an influence or impact on human beings. Nevertheless, Lippiello indicates that "the ancient Chinese people had certainly developed a cosmological theory, in which all natural phenomena observable in the universe eventually found an appropriate explanation".⁶ This cosmological theory is that of the Han omen discourse mentioned previously, which infuses a variety of natural incidents with political significance. It is not a simplex system but a synthetized theory rooted in the traditional Chinese cosmology. If so, to better understand the nature of the Han omen discourse, it is necessary to put omen discourse into Han Chinese cosmology, an ideological category designed to deal with a variety of concepts and relationships in the universe.

In her book *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China*, Wang Aihe examines the role that traditional Chinese Wuxing cosmology played in the formation of political theories of Confucianism during

⁴ Wolfram Eberhard, *The Political Function of Astronomy and Astronomers in Han China*, In Fairbank, Chinese Thought and Institutions, 33-70. See also Tiziana Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China: Han, Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties* (Germany, 2001), 20.

⁵ Yu Zhiping 余治平, *Dong Zhongshu de ruixiang zaiyi zhishuo yu chenwei liubian* 董仲舒的祥瑞災異之說與讖緯流變 [Dong Zhongshu's Theory of Auspiciousness and Disasters and Shifts in Divination], (Jishou daxue xuebao 吉首大學出版社, vol. 24, no. 2, 2003), 48.

⁶ Tiziana Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China: Han, Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties* (Germany, 2001), 19.

the Han period. She explains that Wuxing cosmology is a combination of traditional Chinese cosmology and the Wuxing system. In discussion of Chinese cosmology, it could be characterized as a correlative system of correspondence, in which the whole universe is addressed as an organic system involving various categories of natural substances and phenomena, and their mutual relationships. Its amalgamation with the Wuxing system made it a prevalent political discourse during the Han dynasty, and eventually was widely adopted by different rising political factions for arguing cosmological legitimation of imperial sovereignty, as well as to express their respective political ideas. It seems to be not much of an exaggeration to say that Wuxing cosmology, as the most important cosmological system, constructed the rudimentary infrastructure of Han Chinese philosophical ideologies. During its absorption and combination with the basic principle of omen discourse, Wuxing cosmology was experiencing a long-term process of moralization, which was an inevitable consequence intimately related to the core thinking of Confucian ideologies. This is because the concept of morality had been always advocated by ru scholars as a basic principle for prominent ruler, conscientious bureaucracy, and ideal government. On the premise of this idea, Han ru scholars began to moralize Wuxing cosmology so as to explain the transmission of dynastic succession as well as to define the emblem of the dynasty. Owing to the moralized transformation of Wuxing cosmology from the beginning of the Han dynasty, it is Dong Zhongshu who at last entirely eliminated the factor of violence in the transmission of dynastic power and made Heaven the incarnation of the highest virtuous principle in the universe. Heaven thus was not only an anthropomorphic deity with will and emotion, but also the ultimate arbitrator with supreme authority of virtue, who was responsible for conferring its Mandate on the sovereign due to the sovereign's personal ethics and virtue. In conclusion, a moralized Wuxing cosmology provided a basic framework for omen discourse, in which the way of Heaven was elevated to the supreme principle of virtue over the sovereign's imperial power. Consequently, omens were transformed from natural phenomena to Heaven's will and guidance. In this way, as Wang argues, Han ru scholars could be able to claim their political authority for moral criticism and political remonstrance via the omen interpretation.⁷

⁷ Wang Aihe, *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 150-170.

Wang writes at length on the basic principle of Dong Zhongshu's omen discourse. She summarizes Dong as the one who developed Lu Jia's theory of omen discourse within a moral cosmology of the Wuxing system. As Wang expounds, Dong inherited the concept of Heaven as an anthropomorphic deity and ascribed the transmission of dynastic succession to the shift of Heavenly Mandate, arguing that the legitimation of imperial sovereignty should be necessarily verified by omens, rather than imperial power or military violence. More importantly, Dong elevated Heaven from a natural deity to the supreme authority of morality over all categories of virtue in the cosmos. This seems to indicate that all imperial powers are unconditionally submitted to Heaven's authoritative moral power. Wang adds that Dong entrusted Heaven with the highest authority of virtue, making it the ultimate arbitrator of imperial legitimacy, while on the other hand, he also tried to intensify the intimate relationship between Heaven and the sovereign. That is why Dong put forth the system of correspondence as the theoretical foundation for his omen discourse.⁸ The Chinese sovereign, as the sole legal representative of Heaven in the mundane world, has a unique political status derived from an ancient authority stating that only the emperor had the right and power to make sacrifices to Heaven and deities. The underlying implication of this ancient idea is that of the sovereign who being an incarnation of Heaven, with the ability to achieve the correspondence between Heaven and Humankind. Lu Ruirong also construes the idea of resonance between Heaven and humankind as one of the most significant concepts in Dong Zhongshu's system of Yin-yang and Five Phases. In virtue of this idea, Dong could be able to escalate Heaven to a supreme God, becoming the origin of natural essence.⁹ Huang Zhaoji indicates that it is the system of correspondence that finally laid the theoretical foundation for the Han omen discourse.¹⁰ Because it combined the divine sphere and the human realm, making the sovereign the receiver of Heavenly

⁸ HINSCH points out that the Han omen research based on a precondition that Heaven and human beings enjoy a special bond. See BRET HINSCH, *The Criticism of Powerful Women by Western Han Dynasty Portent Experts*, 99.

⁹ Lu Ruirong 盧瑞榮, *Xihan rujia zhengzhi sixiang yu xianshi zhengzhi de hudong* 西漢儒家政治思想與現實政治的互動：以奏議為中心的考察 [The Mutual Influence of Political Thought and Practical Politics in the Western Han: Research Based Principally on Memorials] (Taipei, 2009), 137-144.

¹⁰ Huang writes at length the principle of the system of correspondence between Heaven and Human beings. See Huang Zhaoji 黃肇基, *Handai Gongyang xue zaiyi lilun yanjiu* 漢代公羊學災異理論研究 [Studies of the Theory of Disasters in Han-Era Scholarship on "The Gongyang"] (Taipei, 1998), 16-27.

Mandate, and therefore fully charged with the bad omens. The kernel of this system lies in the thought of resonance between Heaven and human beings that extended from divination activities in the Shang dynasty 商 (1766 - 1111 BCE) to the political sphere in the following dynasties. Based on the thought of resonance, a complex but orderly cosmological system of correspondence was constructed, in which an amalgamation of the thought of resonance and the idea of omens within a moral category began to arise in the early Han dynasty. It is in such an ideological circumstance that Han ru scholars were able to found proper explanations for the signs and omens from Heaven and provided a theoretical basis for omen discourse, making it a predominant mode of Han politics. All in all, having been structured on a corresponding relationship through the arcane resonance between celestial signs and human affairs, the system of correspondence did offer ru scholars ideological support. However, it should be noted that this system also shrouded the ruler's conduct under a veil of mystery, which strengthened the sacred respect inspired by his role as the only legitimate representative of Heaven, as well as that of transmitter of Heaven's will and intention.

Tiziana Lippiello in her book *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China: Han, Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties* provides us a general idea about omen discourse. She designates that the Han omen discourse is exactly a political theory centered on a systematic moral cosmology of Heaven. During the Han period, the abnormal natural phenomena appearing in the celestial sphere and the human realm were unequivocally recognized as omens purposively sent down by Heaven in respond to human behaviors. These omens inspired various divergent interpretations, together with political significance for the transformation of dynastic power and the cosmological legitimacy of imperial sovereignty. The ancient Chinese people's belief in omens, to a large extent, may stem from their sensitivity to various miraculous signs and abnormal phenomena, which are supposed to be imbued with Heaven's consciousness and intentions. Most of the omens, though miraculous and mysterious with positive or negative meanings, were reported to the throne and explained in order to understand their underlying political connotation. They were thought of as an interruption of the sacred domain into the mundane world. The positive omens, or miraculous signs, are symbols of the sovereign's righteous behavior, the efficient administration of the imperial bureaucracy, the prosperity of the whole society, and the great peace of the human world. On the contrary, the negative omens, those natural disasters which caused harm to the

people, presaged the sovereign's deviation from the moral way of Heaven and his failure in governance as well. Lippiello further indicates that the nature of the Han omen discourse is a correlative cosmology, which intimately connects Heaven and the sovereign together through a complex system of correspondence. The idea of Heaven, in the Han official concept, became the supreme authority, who is charged with evaluating the sovereign's moral conducts and imperial duty, as well as to approve the sovereign's legitimate rule over the mundane world. Omen discourse was later furthered and completed by Dong Zhongshu and did exercise influence on the Han court politics. Owing to the unfavorable political implications that ominous omens expressed, ru scholars could use them as a type of allegorical criticism to clearly voice their dissatisfaction with the government, and furthermore to oppose the ruler in an allegorical way.¹¹ In comparison to auspicious omens and portents, which are the focal point of his book, Lippiello has to admit that the ominous signs evidently attracted more attention during the West Han dynasty.

Eberhard in his paper *The Political Function of Astronomy and Astronomers in Han China* points out that ancient Chinese people had always believed in the balance of nature and the harmony of the cosmos. Omens, both natural disasters and celestial phenomena, were thus believed to be the necessary consequence resulting from human intervention in the balance of the natural order, and their disturbance to the cosmic harmony. When omens appear, given that the enormous influence they bear on common people's daily life, it is for the ruler to undertake the responsibility for the harm the omens had caused. This is because, as Eberhard argues, the Chinese sovereign is not only the highest ruler of the human world, but is also seen as the intermediate agent of Heaven who should preside over the normal function of nature.¹² Differing widely from the rulers of foreign civilians, the Chinese sovereign, neither a god nor a deity, always recognized himself as the son of Heaven and believed that the whole mundane world therefore came under his jurisdiction. More importantly, it is believed that Heaven usually exhibits its approval or disapproval of the ruler through omens, and the appearance of omens was decided by the

¹¹ Tiziana Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China: Han, Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties*, (Germany, 2001), 28.

¹² Wolfram Eberhard, *The Political Function of Astronomy and Astronomers in Han China*, In Fairbank, *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, 33-70.

ruler's moral conduct. As a consequence, it is essential for the Chinese sovereign to obtain omens from Heaven as verification for his legitimate governance of the secular world. This political thought that Heaven sanctioned the sovereign's legal position can be traced back to the idea of the Mandate of Heaven in the Western Zhou dynasty 西周 (1046 - 771 BCE). Early in the foundation of the Western Zhou dynasty, the idea of Heavenly Mandate had been invented initially by the Zhou ruling class in order to religiously and politically legitimize the Zhou's replacement of the Shang dynasty. They emphasized Heaven as the supreme dominant force over the human world who can give its authorization to the ruler on account of his personal virtue and the morality of governance.¹³ By receiving the authorization from Heaven, the sovereign would be able to claim the legitimation of his imperial rule (this may be due to the reason that in such a political circumstance without legally valid system for the succession of imperial sovereignty, the decision as to who was the legitimized sovereign could merely be made by Royal Heaven). Later, in the time of Mencius 孟子 (372 - 289 BCE), this idea continued to influence pre-imperial history, making the people believe that the ruler and his government had mysteriously received a Mandate from High Heaven. Rather than being a religious idea, the idea of Heavenly Mandate seems more like a political philosophy for dynastic argument.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Heavenly Mandate had not been unvaried all along.

According to Max Kaltenmark, the Heavenly Mandate was not a permanent authority, but a temporary investiture only granted to the ruler who adheres to righteous behavior and who always follows the way of morality. Having thus received Heaven's investiture, the ruler should govern in accord with the virtue of Heaven. A widely accepted view is that once the ruler's virtue for governance had been corrupted, Heaven would manifest its warning by sending down a host of aberrant signs and omens. If the ruler cannot understand the intention of Heaven by interpreting the significance of the omens and then

¹³ Poo explains that the Zhou ruling class transformed the Shang conception of Shang Di 上帝, the supreme god, into the highest Heaven in the universe so as to legitimize their replacement of the Shang dynasty. See Mu-Chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion*, State University of New York Press, January 29, 1998, 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

returning to the moral way, Heaven would deprive him of his Mandate and grant it to a new ruler.¹⁵ It is such precariousness of the Heavenly Mandate, as Kaltenmark concludes, eventually contributed to the rise of the Han omen discourse and the emphasis on its interpretation. Because Heaven will always demonstrate his intention through a series of aberrant portents before the Mandate is transferred to a further potential ruler with energetic reigning virtue.¹⁶

Hinsch argues that omens actually seem more likely to be an effective means used periodically by Heaven to directly convey its will, as well as to show its concern over the welfare of human beings. The underlying idea of this argument is to emphasize the active essence of Heaven as the supreme deity in the universe. By focusing on several influential ru scholars such as Dong Zhongshu and Liu Xiang 劉向 (77 - 6 BCE), and their omen studies, Hinsch contends that the Han omen discourse, as a new political ideology, equipped Han ru scholars with a rhetorical weapon to criticize the sovereign and his imperial government. He then comes to conclusion that the rise of omen discourse to prominence in the Western Han dynasty reflects a sophisticated model of inquiry being established, aimed at the Han ruling class. To effectively make use of this rhetorical weapon, Hinsch adds that Han ru scholars attached the greatest importance to the interpretation of omens. Take, for example, Dong Zhongshu, who believed that it was the responsibility of ru scholars, especially those scholarly officials, to report omens to the throne. In doing so, they could present their interpretation concerning omens to the ruler, and might bring their ideas to directly bear on the ruler's mind or on the formulation of government policies. Thus, to understand the implications of omens became increasingly significant both to the ruler--as the omen receiver--and ru scholars as the omen observers and interpreters. By interpreting omens as a warning from Heaven against the ruler's transgressive conducts or the misgovernment of the bureaucracy, ru scholars and officials gained opportunities to question the policies of the government as well as to admonish the ruler for his deviation from the way of morality.

¹⁵ The Mandate could be taken away from the sovereign and given to another man who would be the legitimate ruler. See Wolfram Eberhard, *The Political Function of Astronomy and Astronomers in Han China* (In Fairbank, Chinese Thought and Institutions), 38.

¹⁶ Max Kaltenmark, *Religion and Politics in the China of the Ts'in and the Han* (Diogenes 34, 1961), 16-43.

Similarly, Zhao Xinggen holds the same opinion as Hinsch, thinking of omen discourse as a system for ru scholars to comment on state affairs at the central court. Its promotion during the Han period was due to the unparalleled power of imperial sovereignty resting in a centralized political structure. Such a political environment made omen discourse an effective system, which allowed Han ru scholars to compete with the imperial power of the emperor. At the same time, omen discourse also endowed them with opportunities to better participate in the discussion of real politics via the interpretation of omens.¹⁷

In the meantime, both Hans Bielenstein and Martin Kern voice the same opinion that all unnatural phenomena (including both celestial oddities and miraculous signs) observed in the universe had not become portents in the institutional sense until they were memorialized to the sovereign.¹⁸ Leaving aside the authenticity of anomalous signs and astral phenomena appearing in the Han period, the memorialization of unnatural phenomena actually was a process of transforming the rare but natural phenomena to portents, and furthermore imbued them with political implications.¹⁹

Bielenstein's article certainly raises three questions and calls for comment. First, who reported unnatural phenomena to the throne and eventually made them ominous portents or auspicious omens during the Han period? Second, by what means, or based on what methods, did they explain the potential political implications the omens embraced? Third, for what purpose did they report omens to the throne? In the beginning of the Western Han dynasty, the authority over the interpretation of omens and portents as the key component of mantic practices at court mainly resided in the hands of religious specialists such as astronomers, astrologers, and diviners. They were employed personally by the Han emperor as

¹⁷ Zhao Xinggen 趙杏根, *Xihan Zaiyi Shuo Jianlun* 西漢“災異說”簡論 (Journal of Min Jiang University 閩江學院學報, vol.31, No.6 November 2010), 72-76.

¹⁸ Hans Bielenstein, *Han Portents and Prognostications* (BMFEA 56, 1984), 97-112. See also Martin Kern, *Religious Anxiety and Political Interest in Western Han Omen Interpretation: The Case of the Han Wudi Period (141-87 B.C.)*, *Zhongguo Shixue* 中國史學 [Chinese History], vol. 10 (2000), 1-31, esp., 10-14.

¹⁹ Pankenier reexamined all 127 records of dated solar eclipses in the official sources during the Han Dynasty and concluded that the Han official records are basically identical to reliable observation and proved to be accurate. Except those mistaken records caused by text-transmission or scribal errors, the rest have nothing to do with political manipulation. See David W. Pankenier, *On the Reliability of Han Dynasty Solar Eclipse Records*, 211.

his private counselors, obtaining their efficacy of interpretation in astral anomalies not only from their monopoly of esoteric mantic technologies, but also due to their mastery of ancient Chinese mantic texts, which contain different categories of mysterious messages with regard to divination and prophecy.²⁰ Been far more different from other cultures, the mantic texts in ancient China played a significant role in the practice of divination and prognostication throughout the Han dynasty. This is because the Han cosmological concept could be deemed as a combination of two models. One model based on the three domains of Heaven, Earth and Humankind, inextricably connected with each other through the natural existence of mutual resonance; another model relied on an anthropomorphic cosmology deeply involving in various sacred spirits and divine deities. The nexus of the link between these two models are mantic texts and classics, specifically the essence of the content in these books. However, it is the emphasis on the knowledges and the expertise of the mantic texts in the omen interpretation that gradually diminished the authority of religious specialists and eventually culminated in their replacement by illustrious ru scholars and influential ru officials. The widespread transmission and increasing acceptance of classical texts enabled more people to gain access to the study of texts. Additionally, the application of texts during the mantic practices inevitably resulted in their integration with the anthropomorphic ideologies of Han cosmology, which entrusted texts with authority in omen interpretation. If religious specialists had laid equal stress on both their hereditary esoteric technologies and classic texts with regard to mantic activities, then conversely ru scholars, claimed their authority in omen interpretation mainly dependent on Confucian Classics.

With the rise in importance of Confucianism during the Han period, those ru scholars and officials, who saw themselves as masters of Confucian Classics, asserted their authority in omen interpretation by combining Classics with a moral cosmology of anthropomorphic Heaven. For example, Dong Zhongshu stressed repeatedly that the interpretation of Heaven's speech should be based on the thorough

²⁰ Instead of mantic practitioners' professional skill and personal talent, the efficacy of the Han mantic practice mainly stems from the authority of the mantic method and the mantic texts. See Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Han Cosmology and Mantic Practices* (In Kohn, *Daoism Handbook*, 2000), 53. Cai Liang also designates that the private religious specialists' authority in omen interpretation basically emanated from their esoteric divine technologies, as well as their hereditary positions at court. See also Cai Liang, *Hermeneutics of Omens: The Bankruptcy of Moral Cosmology in Western Han China (206 bce–8 ce)*, 15.

understanding of sage Confucius' writings.²¹ Mastering Confucian learnings and expertise in the omen interpretation seemingly endowed ru scholarly officials with professional competence. This mastery allowed them not only to contend with those who were well-versed in practical expertise of divination and ritual sacrifice, but also to rival the advocators of Huang-Lao thought. In summary, the emphasis on the canons of Confucian Classics, and their wide acceptance and popularity during the Han period, made it possible for ru scholars, who had access to a wide range of the knowledge of Classics, to break the monopoly of omen interpretation by religious specialists, and gradually excluded religious specialists from the Han central court. Being conversant in Confucian Classics eventually became the key to considerable authority over omen interpretation. On the other hand, for ru scholars and officials, they had to excel in interpreting Confucian Classics. This is because, like Dong Zhongshu, who was well-versed in the Five Classics but came from humble origins, clearly understood that he could never enjoy as illustrious a bureaucratic career as those who originated from privileged families with glorious military achievements, or those who had strong bonds to imperial houses. The mastery of exquisite learnings and expertise in Confucian Classics naturally became the most efficient avenue toward his career in the Han officialdom. Additionally, ru's interpretation of omens and portents were expected to be accurate with appropriate citations from Confucian canons and their relevant exegeses. As a result, both ru scholars and officials, who were proficient in Confucian doctrines, meanwhile, held relatively high-ranking positions in the imperial bureaucracy would be able to carry much weight in court affairs. The emphasis on Confucian Classics unveils Han ru scholars' aspiration to monopolize the authority of omen interpretation and therefore reserves for themselves the prerogative of benefitting from its efficacy, so as to better apply themselves to political expostulation and the daily government administration. Far more important is that the authority of omen interpretation for political reasons enabled them to develop this authority to an effective means of political criticism.

The final question bearing consideration about omen discourse is the practical effect when it was applied to the Han real politics. The theoretical model of omen discourse was originally designed by ru

²¹ In spite of political reason for omen interpretation, Dong Zhongshu's emphasis on Confucian Classics, as Loewe suggests, also reflects Dong's aspiration to revert to humanistic values that the Confucian Classics embraced. See Michael Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu, a Confucian Heritage and the "Chunqiu fanlu"* (Leiden and Boston, 2011), 73.

scholars as an ideological tool for political criticism and remonstrance in court affairs. Its ultimate goal was that of restraining the absolute imperial power of the sovereign through interpreting natural phenomena as Heaven's reprimand within a moral cosmology. At least in the reign of Emperor Wudi, however, it was difficult for ru scholars and officials to exert profound influence on court affairs through omen discourse, let alone check the absolute imperial power of the sovereign. When eminent family background and military achievements were the major credential for officials' election and their subsequent promotion to illustrious positions, those ru scholars from humble origins who had successfully entered officialdom, were hardly able to climb to the pinnacle of imperial bureaucracy. Lacking high-ranking officials, as Cai Liang in her book *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire* clearly designates, the ru group was a powerless minority without homogeneous consciousness of ru identity and unified intellectual orientation in Emperor Wudi's time.²² Just as prominent ru scholars and officials at court endeavored to monopoly omen interpretation by virtue of their mastery of knowledge in the Five Classics, so too did they intentionally exploit omen discourse as an efficacious tool in the bloody factional contest for their own political interests.²³

Lu Ruihong holds the same opinion, arguing that Dong's omen discourse about Yin-yang and Five Phases, though prevalent and widely accepted at his time, did not receive credit from the Han ruling class. On the contrary, the idea of Yin-yang that omen discourse embraced made the sovereign believe that omens are a spontaneous way of Heaven and nature, which has nothing to do with the sovereign's misconduct. As a consequence, the Han ruling class made use of omen discourse as an effective way to absolve themselves from the responsibility of misgovernment. In conclusion, rather than being an efficacious means for ru to participate in political administration, as well as for checking absolute authority

²² Cai Liang, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire* (State University of New York Press; Reprint edition, January 2, 2015), 77.

²³ Cai expounds the immanent weakness of omen discourse, arguing that without monopolized learning, standardized hermeneutic rules, and institutionalized positions, it has deviated from its original purpose and was ultimately reduced to the servant of imperial power. See Cai Liang, *Hermeneutics of Omens: The Bankruptcy of Moral Cosmology in Western Han China (206 bce–8 ce)*, 1-21.

of the ruler, omen discourse ultimately functioned as a political weapon utilized by the sovereign and different rising political factions for political contest.²⁴

There is no doubt that Dong Zhongshu's omen discourse is a syncretism of Han predominant philosophical ideas and political theories. He inherited the basic principle of omen discourse from his predecessors, constructed the model of omen theory on the basis of the way of Heaven aiming to remonstrate with the sovereign for the cultivation of personal virtue and the moralization of the whole social order. He even extended this political theory to the Han central court, and coopted it as a performative force to present his political views at court. One task of ru scholars, at each court of the sovereign, was to report their observations of omens with ominous connotations to the throne and to explain their Heavenly implications. However, dealing with omens could also be hazardous. For instance, Dong was accused of being rash in using omens as grounds for expressing his dissatisfaction about the centrifugal tendencies of the autocratic vassal states and unworthy high-ranking dignitaries at the central court in 135 BCE. Finally, his earnest expostulation proved to be nothing less than political suicide, which thoroughly forfeited his career in the Han imperial bureaucracy.²⁵

Nevertheless, the Confucian scholars still conceived of political admonition derived from omen discourse as the most efficacious means of achieving success. Later, the refinement of omen discourse gradually occupied the mainstream trend of philosophical ideas, after the reign of Emperor Wudi, and influenced, moreover, the configuration of Han political thought and the course of political affairs at central court. Its popularity and wide acceptance represented a gradual Confucian movement toward the practice in the Han political administration. Meanwhile, its emphasis on Heaven's reprimand, to some extent, made the sovereign have a feeling of awe for Heaven's authority, even if he did not intend to practice change or reform. It is such reverence towards Heaven's reprimand that urged the sovereign to constantly reflect on his mentality and discipline his conduct, and eventually forced each individual at

²⁴ Lu Ruirong 盧瑞榮, *Xihan rujia zhengzhi sixiang yu xianshi zhengzhi de hudong* 西漢儒家政治思想與現實政治的互動：以奏議為中心的考察 [The Mutual Influence of Political Thought and Practical Politics in the Western Han: Research Based Principally on Memorials] (Taipei, 2009), 157-161.

²⁵ Cai Liang, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire* (State University of New York Press; Reprint edition, January 2, 2015), 46-47.

court to examine, in concrete terms, their own responsibilities to the cosmic-social order and their intimate interrelations with Heaven.

Challenge to Omen Politics: Focus on Wang Chong's "Qian Gao" 讖告

The omen theory elaborated by Dong Zhongshu was, however, challenged by Wang Chong, a celebrated ru scholar who was renowned for his outspoken criticism of a series of predominant philosophical ideologies and political theories in his age. In view of Wang Chong's less successful career in the Eastern Han 東漢 (25 - 220 AD) officialdom and his dissatisfaction with predominant political philosophies of Confucianism in his times, it is not far to seek his potential motive in his argument against the theory of Heaven's reprimand. Never occupying a high-ranking position in the officialdom of the Eastern Han dynasty, nevertheless, he was courageous enough to take issue with omen discourse and its validity at the time. What Wang Chong opposed is the Han anthropomorphic cosmology of Heaven, which viewed the universe as a whole conscious organism being deeply involved in the human realm. In Wang Chong's general refutation of the principle of dominant Han cosmological theory, he set out several arguments, contending that it is incorrect to see Heaven as an anthropomorphic deity who would respond to the way of human beings by sending down omens and portents into the profane field. To buttress his claim, he even absorbed the theory of Yin-yang and the concept of Dao 道 to explain the immanent mechanism of interrelationship between the celestial sphere and the human realm. Based on the principle of Dao, Wang Chong argues that under the influence of Qi from Heaven, the Qi on earth would change, which results in the movement of great unity to determine the potential success of a particular action at a specific time.²⁶ Wang's idea, in a sense, is accord with a materialistic application of the correlative cosmology.

In *Balanced Argument* composed by Wang Chong, he devotes considerable space to contradicting the principle of omen discourse pertaining to Heaven's reprimand. Among a variety of different themes in his book, Wang Chong addressed the problem of Heaven's reprimand mainly in one chapter "Qian Gao". The chapter "Qian Gao", as the title it reflects, means reprimand and remonstrance. The main purpose of the chapter is intended to unveil the essence of the Han omen discourse. It is important to notice that the whole chapter "Qian Gao" is not directed against Dong Zhongshu's model of

²⁶ Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Han Cosmology and Mantic Practices* (In Kohn, *Daoism Handbook*, 2000), 60-66.

omen theory, but a general critique of contemporary Han omen discourse instead. By refuting the political theory of Confucianism that Heaven would remonstrate with the sovereign and punish him by consciously sending down disasters and anomalies for the sovereign's failure in political administration, Wang Chong endeavors to offer people a rationalistic interpretation of Heaven and its interrelationship with human beings.

論災異（者），謂古之人君為政失道，天用災異譴告之也。災異非一，復以寒溫為之效。人君用刑非時則寒，施賞違節則溫。天神譴告人君，猶人君責怒臣下也。故楚嚴王曰：“天不下災異，天其忘子（予）乎！”災異為譴告，故嚴王懼而思之也。²⁷

In talking about omens, they are recognized to be extraordinary disasters and inexplicable anomalies. Those who speak at great length on omens argue that, if the sovereign in antiquity lost the moral way of Heaven in political administration, Heaven would reprimand his bad administration by visiting him with omens. The form of omen is not simplex but diversified, which is demonstrated through cold and warm. If punishment is practiced by the sovereign at the wrong time, his actions would give birth to cold. In the meantime, if a reward the sovereign granted violates the appropriate season, it likewise bring about warm. The reprimands from God in heaven to the sovereign are analogous to the censure from the ruler to his ministers and subjects. This is why Emperor Yan of the Chu state asked: “there are no omens being sent down by Heaven; does this indicate that Heaven has forgotten me?” For Emperor Yan of the Chu state, omens were Heaven's reproof and remonstrance to the ruler, so he was scared of omens when he was thinking about it.

By citing the words from those who adhere to the theory of disasters and anomalies, Wang Chong first makes a brief summary of Heaven's reprimand. In this very definition, the concept Qi with reference to the warm and cold are deemed as the manifestation of omens. Ironically, it is this concept that provides Wang Chong a strong counterevidence. Both cold and warm are employed by him recurrently in the later paragraphs to contradict the immanent mechanism of the model of Heaven's reprimand in omen discourse. Besides, in the case of Emperor Yan of the Chu state, He ascribed the lack of omens in his state to the possibility that Heaven might have forgotten him or was about to abandon him-the son of Heaven who is considered to be Heaven's only representative in the human realm. If so, it is necessary for him to be scared of lacking omens during his reign. Furthermore, what concerns Emperor Yan was rather the legitimacy of his governance, which should be officially sanctioned by Heaven and be verified through a variety of omens and portents.

曰：此疑也。夫國之有災異也，猶家人之有變怪也。有災異，謂天譴（告）人君，有變怪，天復譴告家人乎？家人既明，人之身中，亦將可以喻。身中病，猶天有災異也。血脈

²⁷ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 634.

不調，人生疾病；風氣不和，歲生災異。災異謂天譴告國政，疾病天復譴告人乎？釀酒於罌，烹肉於鼎，皆欲其氣味調得也。時或鹹苦酸淡不應口者，猶人勺藥失其和也。夫政治之有災異也，猶烹釀之有惡味也。苟謂災異為天譴告，是其烹釀之誤，得見譴告也。占大以小，明物事之喻，足以審天。使嚴王知如孔子，則其言可信。衰世霸者之才，猶夫變復之家也，言未必信，故疑之。²⁸

Wang Chong says this is highly questionable. A state having disasters and anomalies is the same as ordinary folk having changes and oddities. If we thought of disasters and anomalies as Heaven's reprimands to the sovereign, are those changes and oddities Heaven's reproofs to ordinary folk? It is clear that Heaven would never reprove ordinary folk through omens in any case. Humanity's physical condition could also be used to draw a direct comparison. Sickness of the human body resembles omens from Heaven. The disorder of people's physiological function would make people get sick; likewise, the disharmony of wind and air would bring about annual calamities and aberrant events. If we explain disasters and anomalies as being due to Heaven's reprimand to the administration of the states, is sickness also Heaven's reproof to ordinary folk? When brewing wine in a round jug or cooking meat in a tripod, one expects to make the flavor palatable. Occasionally the food may have tastes of saltiness, bitterness, acidity, or blandness and does not meet our taste, just as when a decoction of medicinal soup has not been mixed uniformly. The emergence of omens in politics amounts to the unpalatable tastes in cooked food. Assuming that omens are reprimands from Heaven expressing its displeasure and dissatisfaction, then they should appear for the purpose of reproofing the mistakes in cooking and brewing. It is sufficient for people to fathom Heaven's will and intention through the method that compares major to minor, wherein someone uses specific subjects as metaphors. Provided Emperor Yan's wisdom was like the sage Confucius, then his words would be credible. However, the capability that Emperor Yan of the Chu state possessed could only be applied to seek hegemony during the period in decline. Like ru scholars who believed in effectively eliminating calamities by virtue of praying to God and offering sacrifices to spirits, Emperor Yan's words may not be believed and remain in question.

Immediately in the beginning of the chapter "Qian Gao", Wang Chong takes issue with omen discourse. Being directed against the theory of Heaven's reprimand, he raises his own methodology by drawing a direct analogy between national affairs and the human body. Natural disasters happen here and there, and men fall into illness from time to time. If disease cannot be regarded as the punishment to men sent by Heaven, logic follows that the natural disasters cannot be interpreted as the reprimand to the sovereign. Wang Chong explains disasters and anomalies resulting from abnormal changes in nature and the climate. Additionally, his criticism of the case of Emperor Yan could be understood as his rejection of unconditional acceptance to the words of Han ru scholars. Blind belief in their words, according to Wang Chong, allows ru scholars to memorialize omens to the throne on account of their purposeful interpretation of aberrant incidents. Consequently, both current ru scholars and Emperor Yan's wisdom

²⁸ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 635-636.

are inferior to the sages and worthies in antiquity. Challenging the intelligence of those who advocate omen discourse, Wang Chong indirectly undermines the credibility of the idea of Heaven's reprimand. In other words, Wang Chong contends that the words concerning the idea of Heaven's reprimand are questionable, because these words do not come out of the sages in ancient times.

夫天道，自然也，無為。如譴告人，是有為，非自然也。黃、老之家，論說天道，得其實矣。且天審能譴告人君，宜變易其氣以覺悟之。用刑非時，刑氣寒，而天宜為溫；施賞違節，賞氣溫，而天宜為寒。變其政而易其氣，故君得以覺悟，知是非。今乃隨寒從溫，為寒為溫，以（非）譴告之意，欲令變更之且（宜）。太王亶父以王季之可立，故易名為歷。“歷”者，適也。太伯覺悟，之吳、越採藥，以避王季。使太王不易季名，而復字之“季”，太伯豈覺悟以避之哉？今刑賞失法，天欲改易其政，宜為異氣，若太王之易季名。今乃重為同氣以譴告之，人君何時將能覺悟，以見刑賞之誤哉？²⁹

The way of Heaven is natural and spontaneous, which is characterized as non-action. If Heaven could reprimand human beings by visiting the profane world with omens, then Heaven should be recognized as active, rather than spontaneous. The school of Huang-Lao, its theory of the way of Heaven, has explored the truth corresponding to reality. Supposing that Heaven could really reprimand the sovereign, it ought to make the sovereign come to his senses and correct his mistakes by changing the Qi. If the sovereign's practice for punishment was at the wrong time, considering the attribute of the Qi of punishment should be categorized as cold, then Heaven ought to transform the Qi from cold to warm and vice versa. If the sovereign's practice for granting reward is not in accord with the right season, then the Qi of reward would be warm. In the face of the situation, it is Heaven's obligation to change the Qi from warm to cold. To modify the way of the sovereign's governance, Heaven should change the attribute of the Qi for reprimand and remonstrance. In doing so, the sovereign would become aware of his fault and would be able to distinguish right from wrong. Nowadays however, Heaven continues to follow the Qi belonging to the same category, which is identical to the Qi of the political climate. This method particularly departs from the intention of Heaven's reprimand, nor is it an appropriate way to rectify current politics. Emperor Dan Du of the Zhou clan changed the Ji's name to Li for the reason that Ji was qualified to be the future Emperor. Li is synonymous with Di, embracing the meaning of inheritance. Tai Bo accordingly became aware of the situation and went away to the states of Wu and Yue for collecting herbs in order to avoid the Emperor Ji. Provided that Emperor Dan Fu had not changed Ji's name to Li, how could Tai Bo be aware of it and avoid the way of Ji to the throne? In current time, the sovereign's practice for punishments and rewards failed to follow the right way and violated the law; Heaven ought to use the Qi with the opposite attribute to rectify the sovereign's political administration, just as the change of Ji's name by Emperor Dan Fu. However, Heaven again used the Qi with the same attribute as the method of reprimand. If this is so, when will the sovereign come to his senses and realize his mistake in practicing punishments and rewards.

In this argument, Wang Chong first resorts to Huang-Lao thought, arguing that the Heavenly way is natural and spontaneous, and could be characterized as non-action. Before understanding Wang Chong's introduction of Huang-Lao thought into his argument, it is essential to have a sense of the

²⁹ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 636-637.

expression of non-action underlying the essence of Taoism as a whole system. With respect to non-action, it suggests a consummate situation within the natural order of spontaneity, created by sage rulers and guaranteed for keeping intervention from outside to a minimum level. Within this situation, people to a large extent may successfully achieve self-realization and maximize their personal fulfilment without internal restriction or external interference. In short, the main purpose of non-action is to prevent the active nature of humans from being diminished, while stimulating their potentiality as far as possible.³⁰ In virtue of the principle of non-action, Wang Chong could be able to arrest the politically imposed interference from both Heaven and the adherent of omen theory, guaranteeing the personal realization and self-cultivation of the sovereign. Also, saying that Heaven is able to send omens to reprimand people is saying that Heaven is not natural but an anthropomorphic deity with will and intention as a human being, which evidently violates the natural essence of the Heavenly way. The Daoist principle of non-action is adopted by Wang Chong in opposition to the active model of an anthropomorphic Heaven promoted by Han ru scholars.

In addition to Huang-Lao thought, the concept of the Qi is also introduced by Wang Chong into his argument against the logic of omen theory. Being directed against the idea that disasters and anomalies as omens are manifested through the Qi of cold and warm, Wang Chong thus take this idea as the key point to contradict the methodology of the model of Heaven's reprimand. To Wang Chong, the right way for rectifying the sovereign's mistakes could be described as using the Qi to overcome another Qi with different attribute. Based on the principle of omen discourse, however, both the sovereign's misdeed in punishment and Heaven's reprimand to the sovereign himself all belong to the cold Qi. If so, using Heaven's reprimand to punish the sovereign's misconduct is equivalent to using cold to rectify cold, which would never correct the sovereign's misconduct, nor make the sovereign realize his failure in punishment or reward.

鼓瑟者誤於張弦設柱，宮商易聲，其師知之，易其弦而復移其柱。夫天之見刑賞之誤，猶瑟師之睹弦柱之非也，不更變氣以悟人君，反增其氣以渥其惡，則天無心意，苟隨人君為誤非也。紂為長夜之飲，文王朝夕曰：“祀，茲酒。”齊奢於祀，晏子祭廟，豚不掩俎。何則？非疾之者，宜有以改易之也。子弟傲慢，父兄教以謹敬；吏民橫悖，長吏示以和順。是故康叔、伯禽失子弟之道，見於周公，拜起驕悖，三見三笞。往見商子，商子令觀橋梓

³⁰ AMES, Roger T., *The Art of Rulership: A Study of Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (State University of New York Press, 1994), 41-43.

之樹。二子見橋梓，心感覺悟，以知父子之禮。周公可隨為驕，商子可順為慢，必須加之捶杖，教觀於物者，冀二人之見異，以奇自覺悟也。夫人君之失政，猶二子失道也，天不告以政道，令其覺悟，若二子觀見橋梓，而顧隨刑賞之誤，為寒溫之報，此則天與人君俱為非也。無相覺悟之感，有相隨從之氣，非皇天之意，愛下譴告之宜也。³¹

If a zither player made mistakes when he was tightening the strings and setting the bridge, this would give rise to the interchange of the tones Gong and Shang. Not until the master of music found the mistake would he adjust the strings and move the bridge. Heaven's awareness of the sovereign's mistakes in practicing reward and punishment is the same as the musician discovering the false changes of the string and the bridge in a zither. However, Heaven did not change the attribute of the Qi in order to make the sovereign realize his mistake. Instead, Heaven intensified the Qi with the same attribute to aggravate the sovereign's mistaken conduct. This is to say, Heaven does not have its own mind and intention, but recklessly commits the same crimes following the sovereign. Emperor Zhou of the Shang dynasty usually drinks wine all night long, Emperor Wen of the Western Zhou dynasty says day and night: "only in the sacrificial ceremony could wine be used." The divinations and sacrificial ceremonies held in the Qi state were luxurious and extravagant, Yan Zi made sacrifice in ancestral temple, the piglet he offered is even smaller than the block. Why is that? When sons and cousins are arrogant and disrespectful, their fathers and elder brothers educate them to be prudent and reverent. When officials and subjects are impetuous and rude, their senior officials show them moderation and obedience. Kang Shu and Bo Qin lost the way of being a son and a brother. When they paid a call on Duke Zhou, they showed arrogant attitude. They paid a call three time and were whipped three times. When they went to see Shang Zi, Shang Zi then asked them to visit the pine tree and the rottlera tree. As soon as they saw the trees, their hearts were toughed and came to understand the etiquette of being father and brother. Duke Zhou could have treated them presumptuously as the arrogant attitude they showed, Shang Zi also might have treated them arrogantly as they did to Shang Zi himself. Yet it was necessary to beat them with whip and stick, while to educate them by letting them visit the trees. In doing so, both Duke Zhou and Shang Zi wished them to see the different attitude, making them realize their misbehaviors. When the sovereign practices the wrong way in the state administration, it looks like the situation in the case of Kang Shu and Bo Qin, who violated the etiquette, Heaven does not apply a right way of politics to arouse the sovereign's consciousness in order to make him realize his mistakes. Rather, Heaven gave its response by following the Qi with the same attribute. It is Heaven who commits the same crimes along with the sovereign. This is neither the will and intention of Heaven, nor an appropriate method that Heaven expresses its concern over the sovereign by virtue of sending down reprimands.

Wang Chong continues to use the concept of the Qi to oppose the method of Heaven's reprimand. For him, it is the Qi and its two opposite attributes that indicate the two different sides of the natural substance and the common law of human behavior. When referring to the cold Qi, it represents the negative aspect of natural substances, while the warm Qi represents the positive aspect. According to Wang Chong, disasters and anomalies, considering their solid harm to the common people, should be recognized as negative matters, belonging to the cold Qi. Being sharply aware of the sovereign's

³¹ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 637-638.

mistakes in practicing reward and punishment, Heaven is supposed to change the attribute of Qi so as to make the sovereign instantly realize his mistake. However, Heaven did not transform the attribute of Qi from negative to positive or increase the warm Qi to counteract the cold one. On the contrary, disasters and anomalies as omens, which belong to the cold Qi, are intentionally sent down by Heaven to reprove the sovereign's misconducts in terms of the method of Heaven's reprimand. In view of the fact that the sovereign's mistakes also belongs to the cold Qi, representing the negative side of the matter, this would be tantamount to saying that the negative Qi is not eliminated but intensified by Heaven, which to a large extent would only aggravate the mistakes caused by the sovereign, and finally encourage his misconducts. If so, Heaven could hardly be recognized as moral or virtuous. Rather, it is impossible for Heaven to possess a mind or intention, nor is it able to prevent the sovereign from unprincipled conducts or unethical behaviors. In Wang Chong's treatment of the way of Heaven's reprimand, he discredits Heaven as blindly following the sovereign's mistake, which runs counter to the image of Heaven as the highest moral example in the punishment model of ru's omen discourse.

凡物能相割截者，必異性者也；能相奉成者，必同氣者也。是故離下兌上曰“革”。革，更也。火金殊氣，故能相革。如俱火而皆金，安能相成？... 非有不易，少有以益。夫用寒溫非刑賞也，能易之乎？³²

We can suppose that substances that can resist each other have attributes that must be different, whereas those which can coexist and complement each other are of the identical attribute of the Qi. Hence, Ge is in accord with transformation, which is comprised of Li below and Dui above. The elements fire and gold are able to be converted into each other entirely due to the opposite Qi they respectively possess. Providing all elements are homogeneous fire or gold, how could they be transformed into each other? ... Reprimand without change is hardly beneficial. One makes use of cold and warm to express disapproval of the practice in reward or punishment; in doing so, is it possible to change the situation?

To consolidate his argument against the method of Heaven's reprimand, Wang Chong explicitly explains the principle of mutual resistance among different elements in Five Phases. The idea that Wang Chong tries to express is that when faced with the sovereign's mistakes, using the method of reprimand is equivalent to resisting the element of gold with gold, how is it possible for the method to be successful? Wang Chong, however, does not cease at this point. Despite the false method that has applied to the reprimand of Heaven, he proceeds to reveal emphatically the fundamental cause of the invalidity of omen

³² Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 638-639.

discourse, arguing that it is unavailing to reprimand the sovereign without any change. Since Heaven has expressed through omens its strong dissatisfaction with the sovereign's violation of its moral way, it is also Heaven's responsibility to offer the sovereign practical advices or feasible solutions aimed at remedying his transgression and defective administration. In real politics, however, it is ru scholars who attempt to participate in political affairs by memorializing omens to the throne, interpreting them on account of their mastery of Confucian Classics, and providing the sovereign with practical recommendations for dealing with political failure. If, as is likely, Heaven as sagacious as possible to reprimand the sovereign, as well as bring about changes, then ru scholars would lose the gateway of participating in political administration and be gradually reduced to observers or reporters instead of advisors in the Han central court.

西門豹急，佩韋以自寬；董安于緩，帶絃以自促。二賢知佩帶變己之物，而以攻身之短。夫（天）至明矣，人君失政，不以他氣譴告變易，反隨其誤，就起其氣，此則皇天用意，不若二賢審也。楚莊王好獵，樊姬為之不食鳥獸之肉；秦繆公好淫樂，華陽后為之不聽鄭、衛之音。二姬非兩主，拂其欲而不順其行。皇天非賞罰，而順其操，而渥其氣，此蓋皇天之德，不若婦人賢也。³³

Xi Menbao has an irascible temperament, so he always wears a leather belt to release himself; Dong An has a torpid temperament, so he is accustomed to loosen the string of his waistband to activate himself to be energetic. These two worthies understand wearing articles that can change their character so as to overcome their own shortcomings. Heaven is the wisest and the most brilliant deity in the universe. When the sovereign has made mistakes in political administration however, Heaven did not reprimand the sovereign by virtue of another Qi, making him change. On the contrary, Heaven followed the sovereign's mistake and retains his original Qi of Yin and Yang unchanged. This is to say that the motive and the intention of Royal Heaven was inferior to that of those two worthies. Emperor Zhuang of the Chu state was fond of hunting, hence the concubine Fan declined to eat any poultry; Emperor Zhao of the Qin state indulged himself in a dissipated life, therefore the Princess Hua Yang refused to listen to the music of the Zheng and Wei states. These two noble ladies quite rightly pointed out the mistakes the two emperors had made, violating the emperors' wishes and rejecting to comply with their misconducts. When Royal Heaven expostulated with the sovereign for his practice in reward and punishment, it let the sovereign practice his wrong way and even more intensified the Qi. In doing so, it is self-evident that Royal Heaven's virtue is inferior to those two noble ladies.

Assuming Heaven is sagacious and full of wisdom, capable of discerning the sovereign's political failure and remonstrating with the sovereign by using the Qi with the opposite attribute, Wang Chong makes a comparison between Heaven and worthy people. According to him, even the worthy could

³³ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 639.

understand the principle of mutual resistance within Qi and use an appropriate method to overcome their intrinsic weaknesses, then Heaven, being the supreme wise and brilliant deity, surely understands. If not, it seems to indicate that Heaven's motive and intention are inferior to sages' and worthies'. If so, it is hardly reasonable for people to give credit to Heaven's words and reprimands conveyed through omens.

In addition to the case of two worthies, another example concerning the two noble ladies is taken by Wang Chong as a stark contrast to undermine the status of a moral Heaven. These two examples suggest that both worthies and even noble ladies knew how to use the right method to oppose evil, let alone Heaven. In reality, the way of Heaven's reprimand did not have the sovereign make any changes or reforms to adjust his moral deviation. Instead, sending down omens as reprimands to frighten the sovereign could only aggravate the sovereign's transgression, weakening the moral force of Heaven itself. Wang Chong's criticism actually implies that it is not Heaven's words that cannot be trusted, it is that the method of Heaven's reprimand discredits Heaven from a supreme moral force into an unprincipled natural deity. Neither denying the existence of Heaven nor rejecting Heaven's will, Wang Chong's persistent attack on the false method of Heaven's reprimand tremendously undermines the supreme authority of Heaven and the unconditional submission to Heaven's will and intention. In the meantime, Wang Chong's description of worthy people regarding their sensible intention euphemistically reveals his true purpose that sages and worthies are as wise and sagacious as Heaven. It is enough for people to follow their mind and intention instead of Heaven's reprimands.

故諫之為言，“間”也。持善間惡，必謂之一亂。周繆王任刑，甫刑篇曰：“報虐用威。”威、虐皆惡也。用惡報惡，亂莫甚焉。今刑（賞）失（賞）寬（實），惡也，夫（天）復為惡以應之，此則皇天之操，與繆王同也。故以善駁惡，以惡懼善，告人之理，勸厲為善之道也。... 天人同道，大人與天合德。聖賢以善反惡，皇天以惡隨非，豈道同之效、合德之驗哉？³⁴

So the word “remonstration” means “prevent”. In virtue of good to repress evil, it is thought to be the most effective way to prevent disorder. Emperor Miu of the Zhou dynasty blindly abused criminal penalty. In the chapter punishment, it argues that the best way to repress ferocity is violence. Both violence and ferocity are evil things. To use evil against evil itself—there is nothing worse than this disorder. Nowadays, the practice in reward and punishment have deviated from the right way and does not correspond to the reality. These are evil things. Yet Heaven still applies the evil method for responding to the evil things. This is to say that the virtue and the conduct of Heaven are the same as the tyrant Emperor Miu of the Zhou dynasty. By taking advantage of good to refute evil, and to take

³⁴ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 639-641.

evil as an example for inspiring the virtuous people with awe, this is the fundamental principle for expostulating people, as well as the best way to remonstrate with them for goodness. How could it be possible to use mistakes to reprimand mistakes, and then to intensify his evil by following his fault? ... The way of Heaven is the same as the way of human beings, and both Heaven and great men possess homogenous virtue. The Sages and worthies make use of good to refute evil, while Royal Heaven, however, uses evil to comply with mistakes; is it proof that Heaven's way and virtue are identical with human beings?

Wang Chong is consistent in criticizing the false principle of Heaven's reprimand. Different from the comparison between Heaven, sages and worthies in antiquity, here Wang Chong makes an analogy between Heaven and the tyrannical ruler on account of the way they had practiced to repress the evil. It is significant to notice that Wang Chong's refusal of the method of Heaven's reprimand in omen discourse rests on a basic premise that both Heaven and sage people enjoy the same principle of virtue. For Wang Chong, the word "remonstration" means to prevent people from engaging in unethical conducts. The most effective way to restrain disorder is to make use of things with good Qi in order to eliminate the things with evil Qi. Conversely, attempting to correct evil with evil would necessarily deteriorate the situation. Wang Chong thus comes to the conclusion that the best way to remonstrate with people for good practice is to refute evil with good or to frighten good with evil. As such, how could Heaven reprimand people for their mistakes with bad methods rather than good ones? The key is that both Heaven and sages are identical in virtue. If Heaven uses disasters and anomalies representing evil to correct the sovereign's evil conducts, Heaven would be identified as unprincipled as the tyrant Miu. This seems to indicate that Heaven is not a moral force, nor its virtue is the same as sages' and worthies'. The implication of this argument is not to refute the idea of Heaven as the highest moral deity both in Wang Chong's allegation and in ru's omen discourse. By assuming Heaven as an unethical deity in terms of its way for reprimanding, which must run counter to ru's model of moral Heaven, Wang Chong thus radically invalidates Heaven's reprimand in omen discourse.

[...] 譴告人君誤，不變其失，而襲其非，欲行譴告之教，不從如何？管、蔡篡畔，周公告教之，至于再三。其所以告教之者，豈云當篡畔哉？人道善善惡惡，施善以賞，加惡以罪，天道宜然。刑賞失實，惡也，為惡氣以應之，惡惡之義，安所施哉？³⁵

When reprimanding the sovereign's mistakes, as well as expostulating with him for his deviation from the right way, Heaven, however, follows his mistakes, rather than rectifies his faults. To uplift edification with reference to reprimand on the one hand, and to comply

³⁵ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 643-644.

with the original Qi of Yin and Yang on the other hand, how could this possibility be successful? Prior to the rebellion staged by Guan Shu and Cai Shu, Zhou Gong warned and admonished them several times. Did Zhou Gong advise them to rebel when he exhorted them? The fundamental principle of the law of human beings should be to praise good and abhor evil. To reward benefaction, while punishing villainy, this is also the way of Heaven. In the case that people's practice for reward or punishment is not in accordance with reality, this is wrong-doing. Heaven thus followed the unprincipled deed with the evil Qi. If so, how should the way of Heaven, pertaining to the principle of punishing villainy, be implemented?

Being aware of the problem of the method that Heaven applies to reprimand the sovereign, Wang Chong further reverts to the natural way of humanity as the worthy Zhou Gong had used to deal with the rebellion. Irrespective of the model of omen discourse and its validity, even the Heavenly way, as Wang Chong emphasizes, should operate the way of natural law. For the reason that both the natural law and the Heavenly way shared the same principle in reprimanding people. His refusal of the punishment model of Heaven's reprimand does not aim to deny the reprimand per se, but to prevent the situation in which Heaven reproves the sovereign's transgression without proposing value advices for rectification, while follows the sovereign's misdeeds, rather than make him change.

[...] 今刑罰（賞）失實，不為異氣以變其過，而又為寒於寒，為溫於溫，此猶憎酸而沃之以鹹，惡淡而灌之以水也。由斯言之，譴告之言，疑乎？必信也？顧可言人君為政，賞罰失中也，逆亂陰陽，使氣不和，乃言天為人君為寒為溫以譴告之乎！³⁶

In current time, rewards and punishments have departed from reality, intensifying the Qi of cold with cold, and adding the Qi of warm with warm, instead of rectifying the sovereign's mistakes through the Qi with the opposite attribute. This is just like adding salt to the food when it tastes sour, or adding water when the food tastes bland. In doing so, should the principle of Heaven's reprimand be questionable or should it be credible? It is reasonable to claim that the sovereign's political mistakes in practicing rewards and punishments disturbed the balance between Yin and Yang and eventually led to the disharmony and imbalance of the Qi. How could it possible to say that Heaven reprimands the sovereign for his political mistakes by virtue of the cold Qi or the warm Qi?

Wang Chong again lays an attack on efficacy of the method of Heaven's reprimand. He considered the way of human being the same as the way of Heaven. In talking about the moral way of Heaven, it should abide by the fundamental principle of the way of human being, which rewards the good behavior whereas it punishes evil. However, when mistakes took place in practicing rewards and punishments, which is thought of as evil behavior, Heaven did not use the good Qi to rectify them. On the contrary, omens were sent down representing the evil Qi to reprimand the sovereign. In doing so, the

³⁶ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 644.

original evil Qi is not eliminated but intensified, which runs counter to the principle of Heaven. In different to ru scholars who insist on the cold Qi and the warm Qi as manifestation of omens. Wang Chong ascribes the emergence of disasters and anomalies to the disturbance of Qi and the imbalance of Yin and Yang instead of Heaven's response to the sovereign's transgression and misgovernment. Although the disharmony of Qi and the disturbance of Yin and Yang, in a sense, stems from the sovereign's unjust behavior in practicing reward and punishment, omens on the whole belong to the category of the natural world and beyond the capability of human beings.

儒者之說又言：“人君失政，天為異；不改，災其人民；不改，乃災其身也。先異後災，先教後誅之義也。”曰：此復疑也。以夏樹物，物枯不生；以秋收穀，穀棄不藏。夫為政教，猶樹物收穀也。顧可言政治失時，氣物為災；乃言天為異以譴告之，不改，為災以誅伐之乎！儒者之說，俗人言也。盛夏陽氣熾烈，陰氣干之，激射襍裂，中殺人物，謂天罰陰過。外一聞若是，內實不然。夫謂災異為譴告誅伐，猶為雷殺人罰陰過也。非謂之言，不然之說也。³⁷

Ru scholars again claim: if the sovereign makes mistakes in political administration, anomalies and oddities would appear in Heaven; if the sovereign is not willing to rectify his misconduct, Heaven would punish his subjects by visiting them with misfortune. If again refuses to change or modification, Heaven would punish the sovereign himself. Anomalies are always prior to disasters. This is equal to the principle that first educates the sovereign, and afterwards punishes him. Wang Chong takes a highly skeptical view of this ru's words, saying this idea also remains in question. If peasants plant crops in summer, the crops would wither and fail to grow in terms of the drought. Likewise, if peasants reap grains and cereals in winter, they have fallen on the ground and are not able to be collected. The practices in political administration and cultural edification thus resemble that of crop-planting and grain-collecting. It could be argued that calamities and misfortune in climate and earth derive from political administration practicing in an inappropriate time. How could it be possible to say that Heaven uses changes and anomalies to reprove the sovereign, and if he does not rectify his mistakes and declines to reform, Heaven therefore uses extraordinary calamities to punish him? This discourse emanating from ru scholars are worldly words. In the height of summer, the Yang Qi is scorching and broiling and when it is lashed against by the Yin Qi, lightning and thunder ensue. Those accidentally hit by lightning and thunder are thought of being punished by Heaven for their hidden crime. In saying that disasters and anomalies are to reprimand or are for punishment is tantamount to holding that lightning is the means exploited by Heaven to strike down the people, punishing their hidden crime. This argument is clearly illogical and fallacious.

Wang Chong launched a direct criticism of omen discourse adhered by ru scholars. Before his criticism, he first presents the words of ru scholars to elaborate the basic idea of omen discourse. Ru scholars contend that when the sovereign failed to devote himself essentially to the political affairs, Heaven would first send down anomalies to warn the sovereign. If the sovereign does not rectify himself,

³⁷ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 645.

Heaven would send down calamities to punish his subjects. If the sovereign again refused to rectify his political failure, the punishment would finally befall him. This is the normal way for Heaven to admonish the sovereign for his political governance. For Wang Chong, such Confucian political idea, to be specific, the basic principle of omen discourse, still remains questionable. To echo this idea, Wang Chong draws an analogy between political administration and agricultural activities. He again explains omens as being due to improper administration of politics, rather than Heaven's reprimand.

或曰：谷子雲上書陳言變異，明天之譴告，不改，後將復有，願貫械待時。後竟復然。即不為譴告，何故復有？子雲之言，故後有以示改也。曰：夫變異自有占候，陰陽物氣自有終始。履霜以知堅冰必至，天之道也。子雲識微，知後復然，借變復之說，以效其言，故願貫械以待時也。³⁸

It is said that Gu Ziyun submitted a written statement to the throne, indicating that calamities and anomalies as omens were reprimands from Heaven. Without change and modification, they would appear recurrently. Gu was willing to wait for the advent of omens in shackles. Shortly afterwards, omens indeed appeared, as Gu had prognosticated previously. Supposing that omens were not Heaven's reprimands to the sovereign, for what reason had they reappeared? It was Gu Ziyun's words that convinced people of omens' existence and were subsequently used as grounds for change and rectification. Wang Chong argues that changes and anomalies are always accompanied with omens and portents, while all natural things, such as Yin, Yang and Qi, have a complete circulation from beginning to end. When stepping on frost, one is aware of the upcoming thick ice. This is the way of Heaven. Gu Ziyun was capable of perceiving the signs of changes and anomalies, realizing their necessarily recurrent appearance. Thus he employed omen discourse to substantiate his previous words. This is why he would like to wait for the reappearance of changes and anomalies in shackles.

In this particular case of Gu Ziyun, his categorical statement about changes and oddities as omens from Heaven, and his successful as well as accurate prognostication about their recurrence, were unequivocally seen as solid evidence for the existence of omens at the time, promoting the later wide acceptance of omen discourse at court. To refute Gu's statement, Wang Chong still resorts to the intrinsic mechanism of natural law. What Wang Chong wants to make understood is that both disasters and anomalies have their respective natural mechanism. Their occurrence necessarily results from the spontaneous working of the natural world, which is either intimately related to the human realm or independent of human activities. Rather than a divine prognostication, Gu's statement of the reappearance of omens as the verification of Heaven's reprimand looks more like a reasonable

³⁸ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 645-646.

speculation based on ru's existing knowledge of natural mechanisms. Moreover, by mystifying the natural phenomena and entrusting their natural essence with sacred implications, the phenomena were interpreted as purposeful expressions of Heaven's will and intention. As such, ru scholars were finally able to establish an intimate connection between Heaven and the human realm. As a consequence, the words of ru scholars like Gu Ziyun are nothing more than a rational prediction based on basic human cognition of natural law. In his refutation of the idea of Heaven's reprimand, Wang Chong reveals the inherent law of natural phenomena, trying to give us a more objective explanation pertaining to changes and anomalies and Heaven itself.

[...]予之譴告，何傷於義？損皇天之德，使自然無為轉為人事，故難聽之也。稱天之譴告，譽天之聰察也，反以聰察傷損於天德。“何以知其聾也？以其聽之聰也。何以知其盲也？以其視之明也。何以知其狂也？以其言之當也。”夫言當、視（明）、聽聰（明），而道家謂之狂而盲聾。今言天之譴告，是謂天狂而盲聾也。³⁹

The idea that changes and anomalies are Heaven's warnings and reprimands to the sovereign certainly impairs the virtue of Heaven, transforming the spontaneous working of non-action into human activities of consciousness. As a result, it is hardly to be believed. By declaring that Heaven has the authority to reprimand the sovereign, one is aiming to laud Heaven for being perceptive and insightful. Yet it is this Heaven's excellence that eventually impairs the natural essence of Heaven itself. How do we know he is virtually deaf? For such a reason that he is keen of hearing. How do we know he is blind? Because he has acute visual sense. How do we know he is insane? It is due to his well-spoken words. Now that appropriate words, acute vision, and keen hearing is distinctly recognized, according to the Daoist opinion, as insanity, blindness, and deafness. Admitting the power and authority that Heaven possessed to reprimand the sovereign then, is equivalent to recognizing Heaven as being insane, blind, and deaf!

After consistent criticism of the methodology of omen theory, Wang Chong eventually reveals the crux of Heaven's reprimand. The fundamental issue, according to Wang Chong, is that both the punishment model of omens and its methodology tremendously impair the virtue of Heaven itself. Initially, prominent ru scholars and officials like Dong Zhongshu, in their omen discourse, accredited Heaven as the highest moral example and the supreme authority of virtue. But the way of Heaven's reprimand far from rectified the sovereign's transgressions and the misgovernment of the whole imperial bureaucracy. Conversely, using natural phenomena as awe to reprimand unethical misdeeds equated to using evil to repress evil, which would not be conducive to the rectification of the problem but only to deteriorate the situation. Heaven's unprincipled way of reprimanding the sovereign evidently runs counter to Heaven's

³⁹ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 646.

moral essence that was promoted by ru scholars. In admitting Heaven's supreme authority of virtue, the idea of Heaven's reprimand is consequently untenable. The question is, why would ru scholars risk undermining Heaven's moral essence to promote the idea of Heaven's reprimand? Wang Chong's answer is quite simple; that is, transforming the natural things of non-action into human affairs.

《易》曰：“大人與天地合其德。”故太伯曰：“天不言，殖其道於賢者之心。”夫大人之德，則天德也；賢者之言，則天言也。大人刺而賢者諫，是則天譴告也，而反歸（譴）告於災異，故疑之也。⁴⁰

The book *Changes of Zhou* says: the virtue of the sages are in accord with the virtue of Heaven and Earth. Tai Bo thus contends that “though Heaven keeps silent, its moral way has been deeply instilled in the minds of the sages and worthies. It is therefore decided that the virtue of the sage is the virtue of Heaven; and the words of worthy are the words of Heaven. Both the reproof of the sage and the expostulation of the worthy are Heaven's warnings and reprimands. Accordingly, it is highly dubious to recognize disasters and anomalies as Heaven's reprimand.

Never refusing the existence of Heaven, Wang Chong redefines the very fact of Heaven's reprimand. He takes virtue as his departure point to assert that the sages' virtue is identical with Heaven's and Earth's. Here, the words from Tai Bo provide us a reasonable explanation - not because Heaven keeps silent but because, since Heaven has engrafted his virtue in the mind of sage, what we need to do is follow the sages' virtue and their words. Wang Chong's major incentive in his argument above is to manifest that the understanding of Heaven's reprimand depends on the words of the sages and worthies, rather than ru's omen discourse.

六經之文，聖人之語，動言“天”者，欲化無道，懼愚者。之（欲）言非獨吾心，亦天意也。及其言天，猶以人心，非謂上天蒼蒼之體也。變復之家，見誣言天，災異時至，則生譴告之言矣。⁴¹

The articles in the Six Classics and the words of the sages frequently related to Heaven are intended to moralize the sovereign who has lost the way of virtue, as well as to inspire the ignorant ordinary folk with awe. They attempt to make it clear that the ideas they adhere to are not only their own opinions, but also Heaven's will. When dealing with Heaven, it is depicted through people's mind, rather than being empyrean blue. Those who adhered to the theory of changes and rectifications frequently referred to Heaven, and were conscious of the advent of disasters and anomalies every now and then; therefore they propounded a general discourse pertaining to Heaven's reprimand.

⁴⁰ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 647.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 647.

Wang Chong takes strong exception to the words referencing Heaven from the sages in the Six Classics. The key is for him, the alleged Heaven's reprimand lying in the ru's interpretation of omens actually has nothing to do with Heaven per se, nor is it from Heaven's true will and intention. Instead, these reprimands, as Wang Chong suggests, basically derive from the human mind. In saying that words concerning Heaven in Confucian Classics or from Confucian sages are expressions of Heaven's mind, ru scholars seek to accredit these words, investing the words with more divine authority. This ru's effort raises an significant question, why did ru scholars add so much weight to the words? Precisely because it is these words that ultimately endowed eminent ru with interpretative power to authoritatively explicate the political implication of alleged Heaven's reprimand. Indeed, Wang Chong's concern is rather about any attempt by ru scholars and officials at court to exploit Heaven's reprimand for expressing their own political ideas, and then to bear direct influence on the sovereign.

驗古以（知）今，（知）天以人。“受終于文祖”，不言受終于“天”，堯之心知天之意也。堯授之，天亦授之，百官臣子皆鄉與舜。舜之授禹，禹之傳啟，皆以人心效天意...文、武之卒，成王幼少，周道未成，周公居攝，當時豈有上天之教哉？周公推心合天志也。上天之心，在聖人之胸，及其譴告，在聖人之口。不信聖人之言，反然災異之氣，求索上天之意，何其遠哉？世無聖人，安所得聖人之言？賢人庶幾之才，亦聖人之次也。⁴²

It is common for people to take advantage of the present as a key to verify the past, while speculating on Heaven's will and intention through human being's activities. Shun received the abdication from Yao, which derives from Yao's eminent ancestors. It was not believed that Shun received the abdication from Heaven precisely because we may comprehend Heaven's will and intention through Yao's mind. Receiving the abdication from Yao is tantamount to receiving it from Heaven, winning Shun general support from almost all officials. Yu's succession to the throne for being appointed by Shun and later his abdication to Qi, these served as manifestation that Heaven conveys its will and intention through the minds of human beings. When both Emperor Wen and Wu had died, Emperor Cheng was still young, and the Way of the Western Zhou dynasty had not yet been established. The Duke of Zhou had to temporarily act as regent. Was there High Heaven's instructions at the time? It was actually the Duke of Zhou who speculated, making his mind in conformity with Heaven's will and intention. The mind of High Heaven lies in the bosom of the sages; its reprimand and admonition lie in the words of the sages. People, however, attempt to fathom the will and intention of High Heaven, not by giving credit to the words of the sages, but through the Qi of calamities and anomalies. If so, how could it be possible for people to achieve their goal? There is no sage at present, how is it possible to hear the words of the sages?

In the end, Wang Chong reverts to the sages' words and minds. As for Wang Chong, the problem is not Heaven's existence or its education, the problem is ru's interpretation of omens for Heaven's

⁴² Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng Jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, February 1990), 647-648.

intention, which prevents the sages' words from being credited. Specifically, the belief in Heaven's reprimand derailed people's opportunity to follow the words and mind of the sages at the time.

Conclusion

Wang Chong is not so much a philosopher as a critic. His monograph, *Balanced Argument*, has long been characterized as basically a critical document. This attribution is in large part due to the quotations from Chinese classic allusions in sufficient quantity and the extensive use of striking analogies and vivid metaphors. The chapter "Qian Gao", is highly critical of the Han omen discourse put forth by illustrious ru scholars. In his treatment of omen discourse, he repeatedly uses a series of edifying, dramatic imagery drawn from Confucian Classics and Chinese histories to express his ideas. In addition to imagery, his arguments, as seen in the articles, usually take the form of citing Chinese historical events as vivid counter-examples to make his point. With his effort, a new model for moral education could then be established against the well-designed punishment model of Heaven's reprimand. More importantly, by refuting the false methodology that Han ru scholars applied in omen discourse, Wang Chong questions the efficacy of the method of Heaven's reprimand, transpiring its inherent logical contradiction as well. That is, using omens to reprimand Heaven's misconduct based on the principle of omen theory is tantamount to using evil to repress evil. According to Wang Chong's argument, this is not conducive to the moral rectification of the sovereign's unprincipled conduct, but rather aggravates his transgression. If that is so, Heaven can hardly be recognized as the supreme moral existence, as ru scholars described. It should be noted that Wang Chong does not deny the existence of Heaven, nor omens themselves. He even concedes that omens, especially disasters and anomalies, to some extent certainly have an impact on the normal movement of the human world. However, it is altogether a different matter to say that omens or portents are responses from Heaven to expostulate with the sovereign for his transgression or to criticize the bureaucracy for misgovernment. Briefly, what actually concerns Wang Chong was Heaven as elevated to the highest authority of virtue in the universe, and all under Heaven must be unconditionally subject to it. As such, both the natural essence of Heaven and the initiative of the sovereign would be simultaneously impaired. More importantly, Wang Chong has realized that the reprimands from an anthropomorphic Heaven with supreme moral power had nothing to do with Heaven per se, but derived from ru scholars at court. In the name of Heaven, the interpretation of omens and portents could be exploited by prominent ru scholars and influential ru officials as a handy political tool to directly express their personal political ideas, facilitate them to manipulate the state apparatus, and

ultimately achieve their own political interests. In short, what Wang Chong wanted to prevent was a situation in which the political intention of ru scholars were changed into the expression of Heaven's moral response for political intervention. Accordingly, he insisted on his own relatively materialistic idea of cosmology, and endeavored to provide people with a rationalistic interpretation related to omens.⁴³ In the end of the chapter "Qian Gao", Wang Chong reveals his true intention. What he really wanted is to revert to the tradition of sages and worthies as power holders, who have authority of judgement and are able to bring about great peace and social prosperity upon the human world. To achieve this goal, it is necessary for people to follow the sages and to seek Heaven's will and intention through the minds and words of the sages, rather than ru's omen interpretation.⁴⁴ Wang Chong's emphasis on sages could be seen as his justifications for the sage rulers during his time.⁴⁵ His ideas are advanced and, in some sense, sophisticated. While the extent to which his ideas have influenced mainstream thought during his time is open to discussion, his criticism of the methodology of omen discourse did effectively invalidate its theoretical basis.

⁴³ Wang Chong's criticism of Confucian cosmological theory and his praise for the present could be regarded as a natural philosophy with stand of relative materialism, trying to free humanity from the awe of the mysterious force of Heaven. See Chang Chin-Lien, *Wang Chong as a critic*, 11-25.

⁴⁴ PUETT, Michael [J.], *Listening to Sages: Divination, Omens, and the Rhetoric of Antiquity in Wang Chong's Lunheng*, OE 45 (2005-06), 271-81.

⁴⁵ Reinhard explains what concerns Wang Chong are those sage rulers who would be unfairly blamed and discredited for the occurrence of aberrant natural calamities and celestial phenomena due to the highly subjective interpretation of omens, and consequently would be prevented them from being acknowledged by their subjects. See EMMERICH, Reinhard, *Wang Chong's Praises for the Han Dynasty*, MS 56 (2008), 117-48.

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