Death, Funerals, and Sacrifices in Wang Ch'ung's Philosophy

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I. The Social Background and the Mind of Wang Ch'ung

All modern scholars have noticed that the social milieu had a definite influence on the shaping of Wang Ch'ung's (A.D. 27-96?)[1] philosophy. A knowledge of the social and intellectual background at that time will certainly help our understanding of his philosophy; but, as this paper concentrates on death and related topics in Wang Ch'ung's philosophy, I do not intend to analyze this background in detail. Two articles, however, are especially recommended to readers interested in a comprehensive knowledge of a historical period in which Confucianism was apparently supreme, but in fact was degenerated as a result of the popularity of prognostication and apocrypha. The whole society was characterized by superstition. The first article is Ku Chieh-kang's 顧頡剛 "Politics and History under the Theory of the Cycle of Five Agents" 五德終始說下的政治和歷史.[2] In this article, Ku collected numerous pieces of evidence from various classics and historical books to account for the rise and development of the theory of the five agents, the role of the priest-magician in the Ch'in and the Han dynasties, especially during the reign of Emperor Wu 武帝, and up to the usurpation by Wang Mang 王莽, a ruler of the Hsin dynasty (A.D. 9-23), which was justified by reference to the prognostic literature. The second article is Hu Shih's 胡適 "The *Lun-heng* of Wang Ch'ung" 王充的論衡,[3] a pioneering study of the *Lun-heng* in the twentieth century. At the beginning of the article, Hu Shih gives the two characteristics of the social background: (1) the prevalence of superstitious Confucianism, that is, the prevalence of prognostication and apocrypha (e.g. Emperor Kuang-wu's 光武帝 claim that he accepted the throne in answer to various

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prodigies); and (2) the development of astronomy, that is, of an experimental spirit.[4] The intellectual environment of that period, except for the experimental spirit mentioned by Hu Shih, is neatly summed up by Wing-tsit Chan in his *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy:*

> (1) Confucianism was supreme; (2) it was being debased into a mysterious and superstitious doctrine; (3) the unity of man and Nature was turned into one of mutual influence; (4) these influences were thought to be exerted through strange phenomena and calamities; (5) Heaven, though not anthropomorphic, was purposive, asserting its will through prodigies as warning to men; and (6) on a smaller scale spiritual beings exercised similar influence.[5]

Wang Ch'ung is prominent as an opponent of prognostication and apocrypha, and his philosophy is generally directed to a criticism of the society of his time, condemning, as being false, popular beliefs in ghosts and spirits, extravagant funerals, and expensive sacrifices. He writes in the "I-wen p'ien" 佚文篇 : "Though the *Shih Ching* numbers three hundred poems, [as Confucius said] one phrase can cover them all, namely 'with undiverted thoughts.' And though the essays of my *Lun-heng* may be numbered in the tens, one phrase likewise covers them all, namely, 'hatred of fictions and falsehoods.' "[6] 詩三百，一言以蔽之，曰「思無邪」。論衡篇以十（百）數，亦一言也，曰「疾虛妄」。[7] His purpose in writing the *Lun-heng* is also stated in the "Tui-tso p'ien" 對作篇 :

> Therefore, unless such preposterous words are censured, specious writings cannot be suppressed, and, as long as they spread, truth does not reign. For this reason the *Lun-heng* weighs the words, whether they are light or heavy, and holds up a balance for truth and falsehood. It does not trouble about polishing the phrases and embellishing the expressions so as to sound magnificent.[8]

> 故虛妄之語不黜，則華文不見息，華文放流，則實事不見用。故論衡者，所以權輕重之言，立眞僞之平；非苟調文飾辭，爲奇偉之觀也。[9]

This not only reflects his idea of writing but also manifests his ardent search for truth and knowledge.

His metaphysics is, in a sense, close to Taoist naturalism.[10] He held the view that Heaven is unconscious, taking no action and aiming at no teleology. Ontologically, he thought that *ch'i* 氣 (material force, vital force, primal fluid) was the source from which all creatures were engendered. In the "Tzu-jan p'ien" 自然篇, he argued: "when the material forces (*ch'i*) of Heaven and Earth come together, all things are spontaneously produced, just as when the vital forces (*ch'i*) of husband and wife unite, children are spontaneously born."[11]天地合氣，萬物自生，猶夫婦合氣，子自生矣.[12] The same idea is expressed in the "Wu-shih p'ien" 物勢篇:

> When the material forces (*ch'i*) of Heaven and Earth come together, man is born as a matter of course unintentionally. In just the same manner a child is produced spontaneously, when the vital forces (*ch'i*) of husband and wife unite. At the time of such an intercourse, the couple does not intend to beget a child. The passionate love being roused, they unite, and out of this union a child is born.[13]
>
> 夫天地合氣，人偶自生也，猶夫婦合氣，子則自生也。夫婦合氣，非當時欲得生子；情欲動而合，合而子生矣。[14]

The view of the "unintentionality" of parents' giving birth to a child reveals that he would argue with sheer rationality, paying no attention to the emotional side of human relationships. This attitude, as Hsü Fu-kuan 徐復觀 remarked in his *Intellectual History of the Two Han Dynasties* 兩漢思想史, will not lead to the concept of "filial piety" 孝.[15] Whether Wang Ch'ung himself was a filial son or not is disputable, yet it is obvious that filiality is not an important element of his philosophy. In the whole book of the *Lun-heng*, neither filiality is an important issue nor any other moral principle is important enough to require a separate essay.

Being almost coldly rational, Wang Ch'ung invariably demands proof and evidence in arguments. That "A subject cannot be clear without proof; and argument cannot be settled without evidence"事莫明於有效，論莫定於有論[16] is a typical statement of his. When applied to the problem of death, this attitude will tend to objectify the issue without the intervention of the emotion and assert the end of everything after one's death.

To recapitulate what has been discussed above, we know that Wang Ch'ung lived in a time full of superstitions which he detested, that his

metaphysics is centered on the *ch'i*, a kind of material force, and that he was rational and intellectual to the point of disregarding moral principles. With this in mind, we can guess what his attitude toward death, ghosts, funerals and sacrifices will be.

II. Wang Ch'ung's Attitude Toward Death and Ghosts

The opening sentences of the "Lun-ssu p'ien" 論死篇 summarize Wang Ch'ung's attitude toward death:

> People today say that when men die they become spiritual beings (*kuei*, ghosts), which are conscious, and can hurt people. Let us try to prove by means of the species of creatures that the dead do not possess consciousness, and cannot hurt people.[17]
>
> 世謂人死爲鬼，有知，能害人。誠以物類驗之，人死不爲鬼，無知，不能害人。[18]

Here, his arguments accord with his "hatred of fictions and falsehoods" and his need of "proof with evidence." His philosophy toward death consists of three ideas:

(1) The dead do not become spiritual beings,
(2) They do not possess consciousness, and
(3) They cannot hurt people.

He then tried to prove his assertions with ample analogies and arguments. Some proofs he used to show that the dead do not become spiritual beings are:[19]

(1) Man and other beings are all creatures. When other creatures die, they do not become spiritual beings. Man will not become a spiritual being alone when he dies.
(2) Man can live because of his vital forces. At death his vital forces are extinct. What makes the vital forces possible is the blood. When a person dies, his blood becomes exhausted. With this his vital forces are extinct, and his body decays and becomes ashes and dust. What is there to become a spiritual being?
(3) People see ghosts with the form of living men. From the fact that they appear in the form of living men, we know that they

are not spirits of the dead.

(4) There must be more people who died since the beginning of the universe than the people now living. Men do not become ghosts after their death; otherwise, there would be more ghosts than living men.

(5) Man's death is like the extinction of fire. When a fire is extinguished, its light shines no longer, and when a man dies, his consciousness has no longer understanding.

(6) Clothes have no vital forces and certainly will decay with human bodies. The ghosts should be seen naked but they are said to be in clothes. They are then not the spirits of the dead.

The above arguments comprise only about one third of his "Lun-ssu p'ien." The second one-third beginning with "As the dead cannot become spiritual beings, they cannot possess consciousness either" 夫死人不能爲鬼，則亦無所知矣,[20] is used to argue that the dead cannot possess consciousness. The last part beginning with "Men, after death, do not become spiritual beings, do not possess consciousness, cannot speak, and therefore cannot hurt people" 人死不爲鬼，無知，不能言語，則不能害人矣,[21] argues that the dead cannot hurt people. He gave one reason after another to support his arguments. The reasons, some of which are minute and naive, are so many that only to list all of them would be tedious. That is why his style is criticized as "consisting of repeated interrogations, which caused his writing to sound unpleasantly wordy" 其文反覆詰難，頗傷詞費.[22] When we have finished reading the whole essay, we can see that, besides often using the analogy of death to a dream, the extinction of fire and the melting of ice, he was especially fond of arguing in terms of the loss of the *ch'i* in the dead, since the *ch'i* is the pivot of his metaphysics. After translating about one third of this essay, Wing-tsit Chan gives a short but pointed comment:

> In arguing against the existence of ghosts, Wang Ch'ung has offered more reasons than has any other Chinese thinker. For almost two thousand years now no one has been able to refute him, although some of his arguments sound very naive.[23]

The same attitude toward death and spiritual beings is expressed in the "Ssu-wei p'ien" 死僞篇. The essay is divided into fourteen parts, in each

of which one or several historical stories about ghosts or unnatural events were raised as questions and then he gave answers in a rational manner. The reason why he wrote this almost redundant article to express the ideas he has already expressed in the previous essay[24] may be that he thought the arguments with historical events as examples might appeal more to the literati, who are generally antiquarian or pedantic.

As to why a man saw ghosts, Wang Ch'ung explained it in the "Ting-kuei p'ien" 訂鬼篇. He regarded it as possible that a man might see the ghosts, but his explanation is that the ghosts are not the spirits of the dead but something evoked by intense thinking and longing:

> The ghosts that are in the world are not the vital spirits of the dead, they are evoked by intense thinking and longing. Why do they originate? – Because of being sick. When people are sick, they are inclined to be melancholy and easily frightened. In this state of mind they see ghosts appear. People who are not sick, are not apprehensive. Thus, when sick people lying on their pillows are haunted with fears, ghosts appear. Their fears set them pondering, and when they do so, their eyes have visions.[25]

> 凡天地之間有鬼，非人死精神爲之也，皆人思念存想之所致也。致之何由？由於疾病。人病，則憂懼；憂懼，則鬼出。凡人不病，則不憂懼。故得病寢衽，畏懼鬼至。畏懼，則存想；存想，則目虛見。[26]

He inferred this insightful psychological interpretation from two stories in the *Chuang Tzu*. One of them is about Po Lo's 伯樂 learning to distinguish horses. It is said that at that period of time everything he saw took the form of horses. The other story is about a cook's 庖丁 learning to dissect the ox. It tells that for three years he did not perceive a living ox but all dead oxen. The reason why the sick see the ghosts is just like Po Lo's seeing the horses and the cook's perceiving only dead oxen – they are devoted to intense longing and thinking. What they see are all unreal visions. Wang Ch'ung further explained, in an analogical way, why the tired dreamers, the dying men, and the insane people also saw the ghosts. His opinion is that they are all in different degrees sick. "All the three states – sleep, sickness, and insanity – are accompanied by a decay of the vital force and a disturbance of vision. Hence all those people have visions of men and things."[27]臥，痛，及狂，三者皆精衰倦，目光反照，故皆

獨見人物之象焉.[28] Wang Ch'ung's interpretation sounds quite acceptable to the modern reader as he seems to interpret these ghosts in terms of nightmare and phantoms.

All the above interpretations are generally esteemed by scholars. But on the other hand, Wang Ch'ung tended to believe as true the legendary stories in the *Tso chuan* 左傳 and *Shan-hai ching* 山海經, such as "a nation of ghosts in the north" 北方有鬼國. The ghosts, he believed, are strange creatures that do exist and may appear. Furthermore, he did believe in the phantom (*yao* 妖). He thought that "the vital force of Heaven and Earth which forms the phantom is the solar vital force" 天地之氣爲妖者，太陽之氣也.[29] These phantoms can change their forms. "They may either emit their poison, but do not show themselves, or they show themselves, but do not emit any poison, or they produce sounds, which, however, do not form any words, or they make known their thoughts, but do not manifest their sounds"[30] 妖或施其毒，不見其體；或見其形，不施其毒；或出其聲，不成其言；或明其言，不知其音.[31] Wang Ch'ung argued that some people actually saw the phantoms when they claimed that they saw the ghosts. His argument here, unlike his usual practice, sounds very superstitious. This indicates how difficult it is for a thinker to be really independent from the general beliefs of his time.

III. Wang Ch'ung's Attitude Toward Funerals

Wang Fu 王符, in the *Ch'ien-fu lun* 潛夫論, describes the extravagance of funerals in the Han dynasty thus:

> Nowadays the noble clans in the capital and the wealthy families in the provinces hold extremely extravagant funerals after the death [of their family members] though they did not try their best to provide them when they were alive. They even bury the dead together with carved gold and engraved jade pieces. They use the most precious wood to make coffins, and build the graveyard in the fertile field, with yellow earth to install the inner graves, in which ample pearls, jewels, figurines, carts are buried. They construct huge sepulchers and widely plant pines and cypresses around them.
>
> 今京師貴戚，郡縣豪家，生不極養，死乃崇喪，或至刻金鏤玉，糯梓梗柟，良田造塋，黃壤致葬，多埋珍寶，偶人，車馬，造起大冢，廣植松柏。[32]

His description becomes so vividly true when we see so many lavish objects unearthed from the big Han tombs in recent years. A good example is the ancient tombs of Liu Sheng 劉勝 , Prince Ching of Chung-shan 中山靖王, and his wife Tou Wan 竇綰 that were discovered at Man-ch'eng 滿城 , Hopei Province in 1968. These tombs contained more than 2,800 funeral objects. Both bodies of Liu Sheng and his wife wore jade clothes sewn with gold wire. Liu Sheng's burial suit is said to be made up of over 2,000 small pieces of jade.[33] Wang Ch'ung also noticed this kind of extravagance in the burial. His observation in the "Po-tsang p'ien" 薄葬篇 is just like that of Wang Fu:

> Therefore they make figurines to serve the corpses and their coffins. They store a lot of eatables to gratify the spirits. This custom has become so inveterate, and has gone to such lengths, that very often people will ruin their families and use up all their property in order to fill the coffins of the dead. They even kill people to follow the deceased into graves, and all this out of regard for the pleasant feeling of the living. They do not know that this practice does not make any good to those in the coffins, but their extravagance is admired by the living outside.[34]
>
> 故作偶人，以侍尸柩；多藏食物，以歆精魂，積浸流至，或破家盡業，以充死棺，殺人以殉葬，以快生意。非知其內無益，而奢侈之心外相慕也。[35]

Having seen this malpractice, Wang Ch'ung advocates simplicity of funerals, which is the theme of his "Po-tsang p'ien." Wang Ch'ung points out that both Mohists and Confucianists advocate simplicity and economy in funerals, but the world still exhibits expensive funerals. The reason is that the discussions of Confucianists on this subject are obscure, while the arguments put forward by the Mohists are contradictory. Mohists assert the existence of ghosts, then how can the teaching of simplicity in funerals be effective? The Confucianists do not agree with the Mohists, thinking that the dead possess no consciousness and cannot turn into ghosts; but their teaching of simple funerals will not be effective since they offer sacrifices and prepare funeral requisites in order to show that they are not ungrateful to the dead. People then tend to believe in ghosts, and regard the dead as still living. They then follow the practice of extravagant funerals.

After showing the ineffectiveness of Mohists' and Confucianists' teachings, he presents his own reason for simple funerals. His argument is that "the dead possess no consciousness, and therefore lavish burials are of no advantage" 死人無知，厚葬無益.[36] The ultimate purpose in practicing simplicity in funerals is that by so doing a nation will preserve its resources; otherwise, lavish funerals will impoverish and weaken the nation. The fall of Ch'i 齊 in the period of the Warring States is a good example.[37]

IV. Wang Ch'ung's View of Sacrifices

Wang Ch'ung's view of sacrifices is expressed in the "Ssu-i p'ien" 祀意篇 (Meaning of Worship) and the "Chi-i p'ien" 祭意篇 (Meaning of Sacrifices). Since the meaning of *chi* 祭 and that of *ssu* 祀 are generally overlapping, *chi* and *ssu* are frequently combined into one phrase and discussed together in the meaning of sacrifices (to ancestors, spiritual beings, and gods). In the opening paragraph of the "Ssu-i p'ien," we read:

> The world believes in sacrifices, imagining that he who sacrifices receives happiness, and he who does not, receives misfortune. Therefore, when people are taken ill, they try to learn by divination, what evil influence is the cause. Having found out this, they prepare sacrifices, and, after these have been performed, their mind feels at ease, and the sickness ceases. With great obstinacy they believe this to be the effect of the sacrifices. They maintain that the departed are conscious, and that ghosts and spirits eat and drink like guests invited to dinner. When these guests are pleased, they thank the host for this kindness. To prepare sacrifices is quite correct, but the belief that spirits can taste the offerings thereby is erroneous.[38]

> 世信祭祀，以爲祭祀者必有福；不祭祀者必有禍。是以病作卜祟，祟得脩祀，祀畢意解，意解病已，執意以爲祭祀之助，勉奉不絕，謂死人有知，鬼神飲食，猶相賓客；賓客悅喜，報主人恩矣。其脩祭祀，是也；信其享之，非也。[39]

In general, he seems to consider it correct to offer sacrifices. He thinks that "in reality these sacrifices are performed simply because the host is anxious to manifest his kindness. The spirits do not necessarily taste the

offerings."[40]實者祭祀之意，主人自盡恩懃而已；鬼神未必歆享之也。[41]
As to the true meaning of sacrifices, his opinion is

> Two motives are underlying all sacrifices: (1) to show our gratitude for receiving benefits, and (2) to adorn our ancestors. We show our gratitude for the efforts others have taken on our behalf, and adorn our ancestors out of regard for their kindness. Special efforts, extraordinary goodness, merits, and universal reforms are taken into consideration by wise kings, and it is for this reason that they have instituted sacrifices.[42]

> 凡祭祀之義有二；一曰報功，二曰脩先。報功勉力，脩先以崇恩；力勉恩崇，功力化通聖王之務也，是故聖王制祭祀也。[43]

The rational attitude expressed in these passages is to a certain extent close to Confucianism, especially Hsün Tzu's 荀子 philosophy about the *li* 禮, or rites, but Wang's fundamental intention and spirit are different from the Confucianists. This will be discussed later.

Though Wang Ch'ung seems to teach that it is correct to offer sacrifices, his negative attitude is more obvious as he is more interested in arguing that the dead, having no consciousness, can neither drink nor eat, that Heaven and Earth, if conscious, would be insatiable of our offerings since they are so spacious, and so on. It is not surprising that he ends the "Chi-i p'ien" with: "Ghosts and spirits are insensible of joy and anger. Thus, going on sacrificing to them, or completely disregarding and forgetting them makes no difference, and how could they give man happiness or misfortune?"[44] 鬼神無喜怒，則雖常祭而不絕，久廢而不脩，其何禍福於人哉？[45] His argument will easily lead to the neglect, or even abandonment, of sacrifices as he does not elaborate, like Hsün Tzu, the preparation of sacrificial performance and the importance of the performers' inner reverence and sincerity. Therefore, the main purpose of his argument is to show the futility of sacrifices as offered by people at that time, rather than to teach the so-called true meaning of sacrifices.

V. Wang Ch'ung's Notions of Death, Etc. as Viewed in the Tradition of Chinese Philosophy

Among different schools of philosophy in the long history of China, Confucianism and Taoism are the two dominating intellectual trends. In

this part, I am going to discuss Wang Ch'ung's ideas on death, etc. in comparison with the teachings of Confucianism and Taoism.

Wang Ch'ung has been regarded as basically a Taoist by scholars such as Hu Shih 胡適 and Ch'ien Mu錢穆 . Huang Yün-sheng 黃雲生 , after quoting previous scholars who consider Wang Ch'ung a Taoist, sets out to argue, by counting the times Confucius' name is mentioned in each chapter of the *Lun-heng* and other references, that Wang Ch'ung is a Confucianist.[46] His metaphysics is to a degree Taoist. It is also true that Confucius is the most mentioned person in the *Lun-heng*. But his philosophy (taking his views on death and the related themes as examples) shows itself to be neither Confucianist nor Taoist.[47]

A. Wang Ch'ung vs. the Taoists

First, we would like to test Wang Ch'ung's views against Taoism. Even though both Chuang Tzu and Wang Ch'ung consider all creatures engendered by the *ch'i*氣 (air, vital force, material force), the *ch'i* in Wang Ch'ung's thought is probably closer to the material force, as it is the ontological being, while the *ch'i* in Chuang Tzu's philosophy is probably closer to the vital force, something deriving from the Tao and therefore not the ontological being. This difference causes Wang Ch'ung to be dubbed as a materialist while Chuang Tzu an idealist.[48]

When we compare Chuang Tzu and Wang Ch'ung in their discussion of death, we find that Wang Ch'ung is mainly interested in preaching the unconsciousness of the dead in order to change the human institutions, while Chuang Tzu is concerned with the metaphysical explanation of death. In other words, what Chuang Tzu intends to teach is how to transcend the fear of death and achieve freedom or happiness.[49] In other words, he is interested in explaining the Taoistic concept of "immortality" rather than "death."

Let us read the following passage from the "Knowledge's Travel to the North" 知北遊:

> Life is the continuation of death, and death the beginning of life. Who, therefore, knows the order of them? A man's life is but the gathering of the *ch'i* (air, vital force). The gathering of it causes his life; the dispersing of it results in his death. If death and life so succeed each other, what should we then

> worry about? All things are therefore but one. Men appreciate what is marvelous and wonderful, and detest what is stinking and awful; but what is stinking and awful reverts to being marvelous and wonderful, and what is marvelous and wonderful reverts to being stinking and awful. I therefore claim, "The whole world is one unitary *ch'i*." Hence, the sage values *oneness*.
>
> 生也死之徒，死也生之始，孰知其紀！人之生，氣之聚也，聚則爲生，散則爲死。若死生爲徒，吾又何患！故萬物一也，是其所美者爲神奇，其所惡者爲臭腐；臭腐復化爲神奇，神奇復化爲臭腐。故曰：「通天下一氣耳。」聖人故貴一。[50]

Life and death, in this paragraph, is regarded as one and the same thing as they are merely the *ch'i* in different forms. The gathering of the *ch'i* means life, while the dispersing of the *ch'i* means death. Just as the same *ch'i* may gather and disperse accidentally and spontaneously, so life and death may succeed each other, without our knowing which is the beginning and which is the end.

This notion of transformation of life and death is also expressed in the sixth chapter, "The Great and Venerable Teacher" 大宗師, in which Chuang Tzu says, "Life and death are fated – constant as the succession of dark and dawn, a matter of Heaven. There are some things which man can do nothing about – all are a matter of the nature of creatures."[51] 死生，命也；其有夜旦之常，天也。人之有所不得與，皆物之情也。[52] Man should therefore accept passively and follow, in every stage of life, what The Big Clod 大塊, that is, Nature 自然, imposes upon him, as The Big Clod will burden him with form, labor him with life, ease him in old age, and rest him in death.[53]

With this viewpoint that life and death are only different passages of a larger "One," Chuang Tzu considers it unnecessary to mourn someone's death, for after death, man may enter a better and happier place just like the marriage of the country girl from Li 麗 to the court of Chin 晉.[54] Besides, mourning does no good for the dead while it may harm the living. *Li* 禮 (rites, ceremony), one of the most important teachings of Confucius, becomes a debasing code since *li*, to Chuang Tzu, is artificially imposed upon man. So, when Lao Tan 老聃 died, Ch'in Shih 秦失 went to mourn for him and left after giving three cries.[55] A well-known episode is about the death of Chuang Tzu's wife. Shortly after her death, he stopped grieving,

thinking that only through a change was she born, and through another change did she die. He then pounded a tub and sang a song.[56] Another parable tells that Meng-tzu Fang 孟子反 and Master Ch'in-chang 子琴張 sang and played string instruments after their good friend Master Sang-hu 子桑戶 had died. Tzu-kung 子貢 could not understand why they did not behave in accordance with the *li* and asked his master Confucius. Confucius (the Confucius in the *Chuang Tzu*) answered, "They are people who wander beyond the square while I myself wander within the square" 彼遊方之外者也；而丘，遊方之內者也.[57]

The difference of "beyond the square" and "within the square" clearly shows the difference between the Taoists and Wang Ch'ung. Chuang Tzu would transcend all worldly institutions, whether right or wrong; and therefore such issues as ghosts, funerals, and rites, the concerns of Wang Ch'ung, are never real issues worthy of elaborate discussion in his philosophy. It is clear then that Wang Ch'ung, not really metaphysically oriented, is not a real Taoist.

B. Wang Ch'ung vs. the Confucianists

Is Wang Ch'ung one who wanders "within the square" like a Confucianist? His criticism of the popular beliefs shows that he cares about things of this world, but he is not a Confucianist if we compare Confucianists' views on death and related questions with Wang Ch'ung's.

Wang Ch'ung definitely asserts that the dead have no consciousness and cannot become spiritual beings, but the Confucianists would hesitiate to give such a clear-cut commitment. The Confucianists would rather take an agnostic attitude. In the "Pien-wu p'ien" 辯物篇 of the *Shuo yüan* 說苑, a passage reads:

> Tzu-kung asked Confucius, "Do the dead possess consciousness or not?
> Confucius answered, "If I say that the dead possess consciousness, I fear that the filial sons and grandsons may undermine the living in order to bury the dead. If I say that the dead possess no consciousness, I fear that the unfilial sons and grandsons may just discard their parents' or grandparents' bodies and leave them unburied.
>
> 子貢問孔子，「死人有知，將無知也？」

孔子曰：「吾欲言死者有知也，恐孝子順孫妨生以送死也；欲言無知，恐不孝子孫棄親不葬也。」[58]

Though the answer, in reality, is not necessarily given by Confucius, it is of the Confucian view that morality is the major concern. In the *Analects* 論語, we find that Confucius deliberately obscures the problem of death by pushing it far back so as to make it some indistinct background of life. His attitude may be represented by his answer to Chi Lu's 季路 question about death: "If we do not understand even life, how can we understand death ?" 不知生，焉知死?(*Analects*, XI, 12) His main focus lays in the teaching of benevolence 仁, rites禮 , filial piety孝 , etc. – things relevant to the cultivation of one's character, the maintenance of social order, and the betterment of human life.

As to the issue of funerals, unlike the clear-cut preaching of simplicity in funerals, the Confucians teach to perform a funeral according to the rites, whose function is to regulate or to give refinement to human feelings.[59] There are rather precise prescriptions and rational explanations about the performance of a funeral. The Confucians also agree to the burial of the "spiritual utensils" 明器. The motive of making use of these "spiritual utensils" is interpreted in the *Li chi* 禮記 through the mouth of "Confucius":

> In dealing with the dead, if we treat them as if they were entirely dead, that would show lack of affection and should not be done; or, if we treat them as if they were entirely alive, that would show lack of wisdom and should not be done. On this account the vessels of bamboo (used for burial with the dead) are not fit for actual use; those of earthenware cannot be used to wash in; those of wood are incapable of being carved; the lutes are strung, but not evenly; the reed-pipes are complete, but not in tune; and the bells and musical stones are there, but have no stands. They are called "spiritual utensils" (*ming ch'i*), indicating that the dead are to be treated like spirits.[60]

〔孔子曰：〕「之死而致死之，不仁而不可爲也。之死而致生之，不智而不可爲也。是故竹不成用，瓦不成味，木不成斲，琴瑟張而不平，竽笙備而不和，有鐘磬而無簨虡。其曰明器，神明之也。」[61]

As the above passage shows, the Confucians, when discussing the

mourning rites, would take both the intellectual significance and the emotional significance into consideration. Trying to analyze the Confucian theory of mourning rites and sacrificial rites from both the intellectual and the emotional viewpoints, Fung Yu-lan 馮友蘭 makes a very insightful observation, saying: "The *Hsün Tzu* and the *Li Chi*, in discussing this problem [rites for the dead], hold to a midway course between these two alternatives, and take both intellect and emotion into consideration. The sacrificial and mourning rites described by them are, according to their explanations, poetical rather than religious."[62] Fung, in his *History of Chinese Philosophy*, makes an extensive discussion on how these rites are explained by the Confucians. Many passages from both the *Hsün Tzu* and the *Li Chi* have been quoted to support his analysis. I do not intend to repeat everything. However, I think the following passages from the *Hsün Tzu* will be sufficient to show the true spirit of Confucian theory of mourning rites and sacrificial rites:

> The *li* consist in being careful about the treatment of life and death. Life is the beginning of man. Death is the end of man. When the end and beginning are both good, the way of humanity is complete. Hence the Superior Man respects the beginning and venerates the end. To make the end and beginning uniform is the practice of the Superior Man, and is that in which lies the beauty of *li* and standards of justice *(i)*. For to pay too much attention to the living and belittle the dead would be to respect them when they have knowledge and disrespect them when they have not. . . .
>
> Funeral rites are for the living to give beautified ceremonial to the dead; to send off the dead as if they were living; to render the same service to the dead as to the living; to the absent as to the present; and to make the end be the same as the beginning. . . .
>
> Articles used in life are prepared so as to be put into the grave, as if (the deceased) were only moving house. Only a few things are taken, not all of them. They are to give the appearance, but are not for practical use. . . . Hence the things (such as were used) in life are adorned, but not completed, and the "spiritual utensils" are for appearance but not use. . . .

> Hence the funeral rites are for no other purpose than to make clear the meaning of death and life, to send off the dead with sorrow and reverence, and when the end comes, to prepare for storing the body away. . . . Service to the living is beautifying their beginning; sending off the dead is beautifying their end. When the end and the beginning are both attended to, the service of the filial son is ended and the way of the Sage is completed. . . .[63]

> 禮者，謹於治生死者也。生，人之始也；死，人之終也。終始俱善，人道畢矣。故君子敬始而愼終，終始如一，是君子之道，禮義之文也。夫厚其生而薄其死，是敬其有知而慢其無知也。……

> 喪禮者，以生者飾死者也，大象其生以送其死也，故事死如生，事亡如存，終始一也。……

> 具生器以適墓，象徙之道也。略而不盡，貌而不功。…故生器文而不功，明器貌而不用。…

> 故喪禮者，無它焉，明死生之義，送以哀敬而終周藏也。…事生，飾始也。送死，飾終也；終始具而孝子之事畢，聖人之道備矣。…[64]

The above passages sum up Hsün Tzu's theory of mourning rites. The significance of mourning rites is in short to uplift morality and to maintain human order.

> Sacrificial rites are the expression of man's affectionate longings. They represent the height of altruism, faithfulness, love and reverence. They represent the completion of propriety and refinement. If there were no Sages, no one could understand this. The Sage plainly understands it; the scholar and Superior Man accordingly perform it; the official observes it; and among the people it becomes an established custom. Among Superior Men it is considered to be a human practice; among the common people it is considered to be a serving of the spirits. . . .
>
> Divination, finding the lucky days, fasting, cleaning the temple, spreading out tables and mats, offering animals and grain, praying for blessings (from the deceased) as if the deceased enjoyed the sacrifice; selecting the offerings and sacrificing them as if the deceased tasted them; offering the three-legged winecup without

washing it; for the one who sacrifices to have a wine-flask ready as if the deceased drank from his goblet; when the guests leave, for the host to bow them off, change into his mourning clothes and take up his position and cry, as if the spirit of the departed had left: with such sorrow and reverence one serves the dead as one serves the living, and serves the departed as one serves those who are present. What is served has neither substance nor shadow; yet this is the completion of refinement.[65]

祭者，志意思慕之情也。忠信愛敬之至矣，禮節文貌之盛矣。苟非聖人，莫之能知也。聖人明知之，士君子安行之，官人以爲守，百姓以成俗。其在君子以爲人道也。其在百姓以爲鬼事也。…

卜筮視日，齋戒脩涂，儿筵饋薦告祝，如或饗之。物取而皆祭之，如或嘗之。毋利舉爵，主人有尊，如或觴之。賓出，主人拜送；反，易服，卽位而哭，如或送之。哀夫敬夫，事死如事生，事亡如事存，狀乎無形影，然而成文。[66]

The above passages are about the sacrificial rites. "The completion of refinement" 成文 is the underlying meaning of sacrifices, which serves as "the expression of man's affectionate longings."

If we compare the Confucian attitude toward death, ghosts, funerals, and sacrifices with that of Wang Ch'ung, we will find that the Confucians take both intellect and emotion into consideration while Wang Ch'ung argues almost completely in the line of intellect. As I have already pointed out, Wang Ch'ung is not really interested in the significance of rites. In short, the Confucian theory has its "constructive" significance, pointing out a way to satisfy human emotions and further to harmonize human relationships. Wang Ch'ung's philosophy has a "destructive" meaning, intending to attack the popular conducts and beliefs. And Wang Ch'ung's importance as a thinker lies exactly here. If we judge the value of a philosophy from a larger scale of time and space, we will find that Confucianism is both more human and humane than Wang Ch'ung's thought. A world of sheer rationality is too cold.

VI. Conclusion

The above analysis shows that Wang Ch'ung is neither a Confucianist in the sense that he cannot teach how to cope with this "square"

harmoniously, and that he is not a Taoist in the sense that he does not teach how to transcend this mundane world and enjoy freedom beyond the "square." It is true when a Chinese intellectual "advances" 進 into society and occupies an important position, he is inclined to be Confucian, and when he "withdraws" 退 from society and enjoys a secluded life, he is inclined to be Taoistic. Wang Ch'ung may be keen in his observation, rational in his analysis, and clever in his argument, but his ideas are, as Fung Yu-lan comments, "more destructive than constructive."[67] Only in "our age of critical spirit, skepticism, scientific method, demand for evidence, and revolt against the past"[68] is Wang Ch'ung esteemed as a thinker. He was never regarded as an important philosopher in the long intellectual history of China. This fact may reflect how traditional Chinese intellectuals look upon philosophy. To them (and should we be different?), philosophy means, rather than merely love of, or search for wisdom or knowledge, something by which you can "stabilize your body and erect your fate" (*an-shen li-ming* 安身之命), that is, something that guides your life.

Notes

1. The years of Wang Ch'ung's birth and death follow Huang Hui's 黃暉 "Chronological Biography of Wang Ch'ung" 王充年譜, in *Lun-heng chiao shih* 論衡校釋 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1938; rpt. Taipei: Commercial Press, 1964), appendix 2. Hsü Min 徐敏, in his "Chronological Biography of Wang Ch'ung" 王充年譜, claims that Wang Ch'ung died in A.D. 97?. See Hsü Min, *Wang Ch'ung che-hsüeh ssu-hsiang t'an-so* 王充哲學思想探索 (Peking: San-lien 三聯書店, 1979), 174. Fung Yu-lan 馮友蘭 in his *History of Chinese Philosophy* says that Wang Ch'ung lived between A.D. 27-100?. See Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* 中國哲學史 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1934), 589.
2. Ku's article, written in 1930, appears in the *Ku-shih pien* 古史辨, V (1935), 404-617.
3. For Hu Shih's work (first published in *Hsien-tai hsüeh-sheng* 現代學生, I, parts. 4, 6, 8, 9), see *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, appendix 4, 1277-1316.
4. Considering that Wang Ch'ung's knowledge of astronomy was far behind his time, Hsü Fu-kuan 徐復觀 does not agree to Hu Shih's point that Wang Ch'ung applied the scientific spirit to the study of human affairs. See Hsü Fu-kuan, *Liang-Han ssu-hsiang shih* 兩漢思想史 (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. of Hong Kong, 1975), II, 463-466. As to whether Wang Ch'ung's rationalism and naturalism would promote the development of natural science in China, many Chinese scholars of the early twentieth century tended to hold a positive view, but Joseph Needham thinks that Wang Ch'ung, instead, actually deterred it for there must be a law-giver to give natural laws. See Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, II: *History of Scientific Thought*, 371.
5. Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953), II, 159.

6. Based on Derk Bodde's translation, in Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953), II, 159. With a note that the phrase "思無邪" is from Ode 297, D. C. Lau translates Confucius' comment on the *Shih-ching* as follows: "The Master said, 'The *Odes* are three hundred in number. They can be summed up in one phrase, Swerving not from the right path.' " See D. C. Lau, tr., *The Analects* (Penguin Books, 1979), 63.
7. See *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 868. In this paper, the Chinese text of the *Lun-heng* is taken from Huang Hui's *Lun-heng chiao-shih*.
8. Donald Leslie calls for the need of a new translation of the *Lun-heng* though Alfred Forke's translation is generally praised as "one of the great works of Western sinology." (See Donald Leslie, "Contribution to a New Translation of the *Lun-heng*," in *T'oung Pao*, vol. XLIV, livr. 1-3 (1956), 100.) Forke's translation is in two parts: *Lun-heng, Part I, Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch'ung*, and *Lun-heng, Part II, Miscellaneous Essays of Wang Ch'ung* (1907, 1911; rpt. New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1962). The English translation of the *Lun-heng* in this paper is in most cases a revision based on Forke's translation. This passage is based on Forke, *Part I*, 85.
9. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 1170.
10. Among modern critics, Hu Shih is probably the first one who claims that Wang Ch'ung belongs to the naturalistic school of Taoism. See Hu Shih's "The *Lun-heng* of Wang Ch'ung" 王充的論衡, in *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 1289.
11. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 296.
12. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 775.
13. Based on Forke's translation, *Part I*, 103.
14. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 136.
15. See *Liang-Han ssu-hsiang shih*, 413-414.
16. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 958.
17. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 299.
18. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 869.
19. See *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 299-302. For the Chinese original, see *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 869-873.
20. See *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 873-878.
21. See *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 879-882.
22. See the comment in the *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu t'i-yao* 四庫全書總目提要, in *Ho-yin Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu t'i-yao chi Ssu-k'u wei-shou shu-mu chin-hui shu-mu* 合印四庫全書總目提要及四庫未收書目禁燬書目 (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1971), 2512.
23. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 302.
24. Huang Hui thinks that the sequence of chapters probably remains the same as the original. See *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, preface, 9.
25. Based on Forke's translation, *Part I*, 239.
26. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 930.
27. Based on Forke's translation, *Part I*, 240.
28. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 933.
29. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 940.
30. See the "*Ting-kui p'ien*" 訂鬼篇. Based on Forke's translation, *Part I*, 247.
31. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 943.
32. Wang Fu, *Ch'ien-fu lun* (*Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an* 四部叢刊 ed.), *Chüan* 3, 8b.
33. See *Hsin Chung-kuo ch'u-t'u wen-wu* 新中國出土文物 (Peking: Foreign Language

Press 外文出版社 , 1972). Plates 82-101 are about the Western Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 24), and plates 102-112 are about the Eastern Han dynasty (A.D. 25-220). Plate 94 shows the central chamber of Liu Sheng's tomb. Plate 95 shows Liu Sheng's jade burial suit, and plate 96 shows Tou Wan's jade burial suit.

34. Based on Forke's translation, *Part II*, 369.
35. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 958.
36. Based on Forke's translation, *Part II*, 372.
37. See *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 961.
38. Based on Forke's translation, *Part I*, 509.
39. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 1042.
40. Based on Forke's translation, *Part I*, 509.
41. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 1042.
42. Based on Forke's translation, *Part I*, "Sacrifices (*Chi-i* 祭意)," 521-522.
43. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, "Chi-i p'ien" 祭意篇, 1058.
44. Based on Forke's translation, *Part I*, 524.
45. *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, 1061.
46. See Huang Yün-sheng, *Wang Ch'ung p'ing-lun* 王充評論 (Kaohsiung: San-hsin 三信出版社, 1975), Chapter IV, 40-65.
47. Traditionally Wang Ch'ung is classified as a member of the Tsa-chia 雜家 , the Miscellaneous School. I prefer this classification.
48. In recent years, Wang Ch'ung is quite popular in Communist China. He is praised as a great materialist and fighter.
49. Burton Watson has stated briefly in his introduction to his translation of the *Chuang Tzu*, "The central theme of the *Chuang Tzu* may be summed up in a single word: freedom." See Burton Watson, tr., *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia UP, 1964), 3.
50. *Chuang Tzu chi-shih* 莊子集釋 (Rpt. Taipei: Ho-lo 河洛圖書出版社 , 1974), 733.
51. Translation by Burton Watson. See *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, 76. I think Watson's translation is very close to the original in both meaning and syntax.
52. *Chuang Tzu chi-shih*, 241.
53. The same words for this idea appear twice in "The Great and Venerable Teacher," *Chuang Tzu*. See *Chuang Tzu chi-shih*, 242 and 262. The Chinese original reads: "夫大塊載我以形，勞我以生，佚我以老，息我以死。"
54. The story is told in the second chapter, "Discussion on Making All Things Equal" 齊物論. See *Chuang Tzu chi-shih*, 103.
55. The story is told in the third chapter, "The Secret of Caring for Life" 養生主, *Chuang Tzu*. See *Chuang Tzu chi-shih*, 127-128.
56. The story is told in the eighteenth chapter, "Perfect Happiness" 至樂, *Chuang Tzu*. See *Chuang Tzu chi-shih*, 614-615.
57. The story is told in the sixth chapter, "The Great and Venerable Teacher." See *Chuang Tzu chi-shih*, 264-268.
58. See *Lun-heng chiao-shih*, p. 961. The passage is quoted as a note in the "Po-tsang p'ien."
59. Mencius, Hsün Tzu, and the *Li chi* all hold similar view. See the discussion in Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (Chinese), 409-414.
60. Derk Bodde's translation, Vol. I, p. 345.
61. *Li chi* (*Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an* ed.), II, 14-15. Also quoted in Fung Yu-lan, *A History*

of Chinese Philosophy (Chinese), 419.

62. In 1928, Fung Yu-lan wrote a perceptive article "Confucian Theories of Marriage, Mourning, and Sacrificial Rites" 儒家對于婚喪祭禮之理論, which received a favorable review by the *Wen-hsüeh fu-k'ang* 文學副刊. Both articles are collected in *Ku-shih pien* 古史辨, II, 212-228 and 228-229. Fung's views were later incorporated into his *History of Chinese* Philosophy, I (1931) to be part of the 14th chapter.
63. Bodde's translation, I, 349.
64. The *Hsün Tzu* (*SPTK* ed.), 244-246. Also see quotations in Fung Yu-lan's *History* (Chinese), 424-425.
65. Bodde's translation, I, 351.
66. The *Hsün Tzu* (*SPTK* ed.), 244-246. Also see quotations in Fung Yu-lan's *History* (Chinese), 424-425.
67. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 292.
68. *Ibid.*