

Debate Over Post-Mortem Existence and Thrifty Burial in Wang Chong's *Lunheng*

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Abstract: Han China (202 BCE – 220 CE) is a haunted world filled with spirits, demons, and ghosts of all kinds, whose influence is felt everywhere. In a time when variegated theories on the spirit world and mortuary traditions vie with each other for prominence, Wang Chong (27 – ca. 100 CE), a most original philosopher, offers his systematic treatment of these contentious issues. Writing in a lively style with passion, reason, and patience, Wang Chong actively engages himself in these debates and applies organized and meticulous inquiry to tell fallacies of belief from what he believes to be the truth. This paper examines Wang Chong's arguments on post-mortem existence and thrifty burial in detail and pays special attention to the strengths and weaknesses of his thesis.

Keywords: Wang Chong; *Lunheng*; post-mortem existence; thrifty burial

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1 Introduction

Wang Chong (27 – ca. 100 CE), courtesy name Zhongren, is one of his time's greatest contrarians and skeptical minds. Being a studious reader and writer, Wang Chong has left an impressive corpus of works, including his masterpiece *Lunheng* (Balance of Discourses). The received version of *Lunheng* contains 85 chapters, which he composed over a long period of time, with some chapters dating back to his early days in Luoyang while some were written near the end of his retiring life.

In his own words, the title *Lunheng* is meant to be glossed as “balanced arguments”. Wang Chong has also made clear his purpose for *Lunheng*. In the chapter “Lost Accounts”, he stated, “There are dozens of pain in *Lunheng*. If to put it in one sentence, the purpose of *Lunheng* is to debunk what is false and ridiculous”. 論衡篇以十數,亦一言也,曰:疾虛妄。(Huang 1990: 870)

It is fair to conclude that Wang Chong's *Lunheng* is a collection of polemic essays aiming to castigate what he considered to be false and ridiculous of his day, evinced already by some of the condemning titles: "Wen kong" (Questioning Kongzi) and "Ci meng" (Criticizing Mengzi), criticizing Kongzi and Mengzi; "Si wei" (False Reports About Death); the three chapters concerning "exaggeration" ("Yu zeng" Exaggeration of Words, "Ru zeng" Exaggeration of Scholars, "Yi zeng" Exaggeration in the Classics), nine chapters exposing "falsehoods," such as the chapter "Dao xu" (Falsehoods of the Daoists). In his influential reevaluation of the "scientific method" of the "materialist" Wang Chong, modern scholar Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) contextualized *Lunheng* in a time when falsehoods and ignorance triumphed and reigned:

漢代的大病就是虛妄。漢代是一個騙子時代。那二百多年之中,也不知造出了多少荒唐的神話,也不知造出了多少荒謬的假書。我們讀的古代史,自開闢至周朝,其中也不知道有多少部分是漢代一班騙子假造出來的。王莽、劉歆都是騙子中的國手。讖緯之學便是西漢騙子的自然產兒。王充對於這種虛妄的行為,實在看不上眼。(Huang 1990: 1274)

The great plague in the Han dynasty is falsehood and ridiculousness. The era of the Han is a time of fraud. Over two hundred years, we do not know how many myths were trumped-up, nor do we know how many ridiculous books were fabricated. The ancient history that is passed on for us to read now, from the beginning of history to the Zhou dynasty, we do not know what percentage was invented by those Han frauds. Wang Mang (45 BCE – 23 CE) and Liu Xin (50 BCE – 23 CE) are among the best of those frauds. The studies of those apocryphal texts are the natural product of these Western Han frauds. In the face of these falsehoods and ridiculousness, there is no way that Wang Chong would not look with contempt. (Translated by the author of this article)

While Hu Shi is undeniably right in emphasizing the significant contribution *Lunheng*'s spirit of skepticism made in the intellectual pursuit of truth and in the history of Chinese philosophy in general, he has gone a step too far in conjuring up a picture of dire ignorance and sham in Wang Chong's time, which he puts as diametrically opposed to what Wang Chong, the great "rationalist," stands for. By labeling scholars such as Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE) and Liu Xin as mere frauds, he has oversimplified the tenor of the intellectual debates in the Han, which is certainly more complex than the arbitrary dualism "superstition" vis-à-vis "science". Moreover, if we zoom in on the texts of *Lunheng*, we find Wang Chong's arguments are not always as rational as he has claimed. The limits and weaknesses of his reasoning and methodology will be examined more closely when we treat the chapters on death, ghosts and burial.

1 Debate Over Post-mortem Existence as Sentient and Baleful Ghosts

Anxiety is an inherent part of death itself. In Early China, the fear of death and the uncertainty associated with it bred a spectrum of speculations on death and afterlife existence, with some crystalizing into systemic theories and vying with each other over time. K. E. Brashier has made an insightful attempt to categorize and discuss five "different emphases of the living's interaction with the dead":

1. The living and the dead are two distinct and fully cognizant parties engaged in an exchange relationship.
2. Only the living subject who is sincere or true can engage in exchange relationships with the dead.
3. The medium of direct interaction between the living and the dead is mental in nature and includes dreams, illness and meditations during abstentions.
4. The dead are the objectified thoughts of the living.
5. The dead are not sentient and hence there is no interaction. (Brashier 2011: 185–186)

The polyphonic views regarding the thorny issue of post-mortem existence and a living person's interaction with the dead, have fueled several major debates whose influence is far-reaching, most fierce of which being those between the proponents and opponents of the existence of ghosts after death. Wang Chong is not the first to question the existence of ghosts. But his rationalistic approach, ontological questioning and fiercer ghost-free stance have set him apart from his skeptical predecessors (such as Xunzi), and have explored new depths of this ongoing debate before the advent of Buddhist eschatology.

While references to the afterlife existence abound and scatter throughout *Lunheng*, chapters “Lun si” (On Death), “Si wei” (False Reports About Death), “Ji yao” (Accounts about Demons), and “Ding gui” (Revaluating Ghosts), “Yan du” (On Poison) form the core of his thesis. The chapter “Lun si” is the most organized and theoretical rebuttal in *Lunheng* to what seems to be generally believed in his day, i. e., that “after death, people become ghosts, possess sentience and are capable of harming living persons” 人死為鬼, 有知, 能害人。(Huang 1990: 871)

With his targets in clear loci, Wang Chong sets out in this long article to falsify each of the three clauses through examination of the evidence and experiment, and endeavors to prove that contrary to what people are inclined to believe, “after death people do not become ghosts, have no sentience and are not capable of harming living persons” 人死不為鬼, 無知, 不能害人。(Huang 1990: 871)

First, he sets out to establish the case that people do not become ghosts after death. He does so by first of all explicating the relationship between the bodily form and the “qi” (essence):

人之所以生者, 精氣也。死而精氣滅。能為精氣者, 血脈也。人死血脈竭, 竭而精氣滅, 滅而形體朽, 朽而成灰土, 何用為鬼? 朽則消亡, 荒忽不見, 故謂之鬼神。人見鬼神之形, 故非死人之精也。何則? 鬼神, 荒忽不見之名也。人死精神升天, 骸骨歸土, 故謂之鬼神。人用神氣生, 其死復歸神氣。陰陽稱鬼神, 人死亦稱鬼神。氣之生人, 猶水之為冰也。水凝為冰, 氣凝為人; 冰釋為水, 人死復神。其名為神也, 猶冰釋更名水也。人見名異, 則謂有知, 能為形而害人, 無據以論之也。(Huang: 1990: 871)

The reason why people are born is because of the essential “qi.” When people die, the essential “qi” disappears with them. What produces the essential “qi” are the blood and vessels. When people die, the blood and tubular vessels are exhausted. The exhaustion of the blood and vessels make the essential “qi” disappear. When the essential “qi” disappears, the physical body corrupts. When the physical body corrupts, it becomes ashes and earth. By what means can it turn into a ghost, then? When the human body corrupts, it vanishes

and becomes untraceable. That is what we call “gui” and “shen”. When people see “gui” and “shen” possessing human form, then they are not seeing the essential “qi” of the dead people. Why is that? “gui” and “shen” are the names of what is faint and untraceable. When people die, spirits go up to heaven and bones return to the earth. So, we call them “gui” and “shen”. People are born of the “shen qi”. When they die, they return to the original form of “shen qi”. The “yin” and “yang” forces are the “gui” and “shen”. When people die, they also become “gui” and “shen”. The “qi” giving birth to a human being is like water turning into ice. Water condenses to become ice and the “qi” condenses to become humans. The ice melts it returns to the form of water. And when people die, they return to the form of “shen”. This state is called “shen”, just like ice resuming the name of water when it melts. When people see the change in names, they think “the “gui” and “shen” are sentient and capable of harming people. That is a groundless claim without proof to support it. (Translated by the author of this article)

The tenor of his arguments lies in his conviction that the essential *qi* is not an independent entity that could be distinct from the material form and it could not survive alone without the support of the material form. Rather, as Wang Chong argues, the essential “qi” is dependent on the material form. It is born with the human body and fades away with it when it corrupts after death. Moreover, the essential “qi” is produced and nourished by human blood and tubular vessels. Since it is common sense that human blood and vessels stop functioning after a person’s death, the essential “qi” thus is not capable of taking up human forms again, because it no longer sustains the support from the bodily form (blood and vessels). The “gui” and “shen” is just another state of being of the internal essential “qi” when people die, not much unlike the relationship between ice and water, which is just different names for the same matter in different stages of being. It is worth noting that here Wang Chong is not directly discrediting the possible existence of ghosts. Rather, the conclusion his chain of argumentations leads to is that the “gui” and “shen” are not capable of assuming human forms.

Moreover, Wang Chong ridicules the absurdity of the dead turning into ghosts by assuming that if it is indeed the case, then the number of ghosts should be astronomical since, from the beginning of the world, there are numerous dead. However, this is clearly not the case:

計今人之數，不若死者多。如人死輒為鬼，則道路之上，一步一鬼也。人且死見鬼，宜見數百千萬，滿堂盈廷，填塞巷路，不宜徒見一兩人也。(Huang 1990: 873)

The aggregate of the living today is not as many as those dead. If people turn into ghosts upon death, then on roads, there should be a ghost on every step you make. When the dying sees ghosts, they should see myriads of ghosts filling the hall and the courtyard and roads rather than just one or two. (Translated by the author of this article)

Second, after ruling out the existence of ghosts in human forms, Wang Chong continues his line of thought to deny the possibility of post-mortem percipience:

夫死人不能為鬼，則亦無所知矣。何以驗之？以未生之時無所知也。人未生，在元氣之中；既死，

復歸元氣。元氣荒忽,人氣在其中。人未生無所知,其死歸無知之本,何能有知乎? (Huang 1990: 875)

Now that dead people cannot become ghosts, then they also do not have the power of sentience. How can we vary this? We can know from the fact that people do not have sentience before they are born. Before people are born, they reside in the vital “qi”. After death, they return to the vital “qi”. The vital “qi” is faint and undetectable and human “qi” resides in it. Before birth people do not possess sentience. After death, they return to the root of non-sentience. How can they still possess sentience? (Translated by the author of this article)

Sentience is a unique quality of living things, dependent on the functioning of the living bodily form. Since humans do not possess the power of sentience before they are born and death is a return to the original “qi”, Wang Chong thus extrapolates that dead people could not possibly assume sentient human forms. As he summarizes, “the body necessitates the ‘qi’ in assuming form and the ‘qi’ necessitates the body to acquire sentience” 形須氣而成,氣須形而知。(Huang 1990: 875)

Third, Wang Chong goes on to falsify the popular belief that ghosts are capable of harming living persons. To be able to harm others, Wang Chong observes, one has to apply physical forces, i. e., the bodily form that needs constant nourishment from food and drink. The “qi” itself cannot harm people. What can harm others must assume some kind of physical form. If they cannot use physical forces, then naturally, they will not be able to harm people:

凡人與物所以能害人者,手臂把刃,爪牙堅利之故也。今人死,手臂朽敗,不能復持刃;爪牙隳落,不能復嚙噬。安能害人? (Huang 1990: 880)

In all cases where people or other living things are capable of harming others, it is because they have blades in their hands or sharp claws or teeth. Now when people die, their hands corrupt and can no longer hold blades; their claws and teeth fall, and they can no longer bite others. How can they harm people? (Translated by the author of this article)

Since the “qi” cannot assume physical form, which is the prerequisite for assuming the capability to harm people, the so-called ghosts, without the support of the bodily, are in no way a threat to living persons.

In the chapter “Lun si” Wang Chong systematically refutes the three most popular and fundamental theses regarding post-mortem existence, i. e., that the dead become ghosts, retain the power of sentience and are capable of harming living persons. His masterful use of ridicule, analogy, examination of the evidence and experiment has made his stance clear on this contentious matter. To ground his theoretical analysis, in “Si wei”, the chapter immediately following “Lun si”, Wang Chong reasserts his position in the form of dialogues responding to imagined adversaries who adduce famous historical ghost stories as evidence. He does so by attacking the self-contradictories and implausible explanations in these stories. At times he would provide his own conjure as to the “real reason” behind those strange phenomena that are usually cited as evidence for the existence of baleful ghosts. Take, for example, the strange case of “avenging odor from the tomb”:

亡新改葬元帝傅后，發其棺，取玉柙印璽，送定陶，以民禮葬之。發棺時，臭憧于天。洛陽丞臨棺，聞臭而死。(Huang 1990: 906)

In the demised Xin Dynasty, the tomb of Empress Fu of Emperor Yuan was relocated. Her coffin was opened and her jade jewelry box and seal were taken out. “Her corpse” was sent to Dingtao and buried according to the rites of commoners. When the coffin was opened, a strong smell reached the sky. The official from Luoyang who was overseeing the process, died of the strong odor. (Translated by the author of this article)

The popular reading by defenders of ghosts of this anecdote is that Empress Fu, in the form of a ghost, was furious over her tomb, the resting place, being offended. So, she released the killing odor as her revenge. The skeptical Wang Chong is not convinced and speculates on the possible and rational explanation:

臭聞於天。多藏食物，腐朽猥發，人不能堪毒憤，而未為怪也。(Huang 1990: 907)

The reason that the strong odor reached the sky was that the tombs stored too much food. When the food corrupted, it gave out an odor. People “present” could not stand the poisoning smell. This incident should not be considered abnormal. (Translated by the author of this article)

Throughout the “Si Wei” chapter, by exposing the aporia and implausible explanations found in these historical ghost anecdotes, Wang Chong not only inflicted embarrassing damage to the supporters of post-mortem ghosts but also managed to add fuel to reinforce his theoretical stance on the ghost as is explicated in the previous “Lun si” chapter.

While it is fair to label Wang Chong as a brilliant polemicist with an independent critical mind, we should also note that he is in no way always successful in providing “rationalist” explanations. He authors not only some of the most brilliant philosophical ruminations but also some of the very ambiguous and very much “un-Wang Chong” expositions. As Michael Puett notes:

A common reading of Wang Chong is that he is trying to critique the views of the foolish, contradictory, and superstitious views of his day. This is certainly true enough as far as it goes — Wang Chong does indeed spend almost the entirety of the “Lunheng” attacking beliefs of the day. But it would be difficult to argue that he does so in the name of something we might call rationality — since, again, he never provides a rational basis of knowledge to replace one founded on either antiquity or Heaven. (Puett 2006: 280)

It is certainly the case regarding a ghost. If we pay close attention to his arguments, his theorization on the contentious issues of ghosts betrays conceptual quagmires. As is already mentioned in the previous treatment in his chapter “Lun si”, Wang Chong believes in the existence of ghosts while vehemently refuting that it is the transformed from the dead person’s essence *qi*. The ambiguity is best shown in the chapter “Ding gui” (Revising Ghosts), where he introduces possible explanations for the phenomenon of ghosts.

One source of ghosts comes from the “essence of old living things (other than humans)”:

一曰：鬼者，老物精也。夫物之老者，其精為人。亦有未老，性能變化，象人之形。(Huang 1990: 934)

Some say “gui” is the essence of old living things. When the essence of living things is old enough, their essence can transform into humans. It is also possible that some that are not old are naturally inclined to transform and can assume the form of humans. (Translated by the author of this article)

The “old living things” can be many things. In “Lun si”, Wang Chong states that the six domestic animals (horse, pig, ox, sheep, chicken, dog) are capable of changing into the human form provided that they are still alive:

六畜能變化象人之形者，其形尚生，精氣尚在也。如死，其形腐朽，雖虎兕勇狎，不能復化。魯公牛哀病化為虎，亦以未死也。世有以生形轉為生類者矣，未有以死身化為生象者也。(Huang 1990: 873)

That the six domestic animals can transform into human form because they are still alive and the essential *qi* is still there. When dead, their form corrupts. After that “animals” even if as fierce and ferocious as tigers and rhinoceros, can no longer transform. That Gongniu Ai from the Lu kingdom was able to transform into a tiger was also because he did so before death. In this world, there are living things transforming into other life forms, but dead forms are not able to change into life forms. (Translated by the author of this article)

But among all explanations, Wang is most inclined to read “gui” as manifestations of *qi*. It can be the kind of “qi” that makes people sick:

一曰鬼者，人所得病之氣也。氣不和者中人，中人為鬼，其氣象人形而見。(Huang 1990: 933)

Some say ghosts are the type of *qi* that makes people sick. The type of *qi* that is not harmonious can hurt people. If they can hurt people, it is called “gui” and assumes human form to be seen. (Translated by the author of this article)

The fact that Wang Chong has laid out so many possible explanations for the phenomenon of ghosts (some congruent with others, some not) reveals his ambivalence. Not like Wang Chong who argues with great confidence in chapters “Lun si” and “Si wei”, in “Ding gui” he admits the difficulty in understanding “gui” and “shen”: “The way of the heaven is difficult to understand. “gui” and “shen” are obscure and ambiguous. So, I lay out all “possible explanations” for the world to investigate.”天道難知，鬼神闇昧，故具載列，令世察之也。(Huang 1990: 936)

2 Debate over Thrifty Burial

In the chapter “Bo zang” (Thrifty Burial), Wang Chong engages himself in a debate that has been going on

for too long a time but is too important to ignore because it immediately concerns the everyday lives of his contemporaries. What he is trying to achieve in previous chapters dealing with post-mortem existence is, in his emphasis, theoretical preparation for the logical conclusion of thrifty burial, in the hope of freeing his countrymen from commitment to lavish burials. And he starts the chapter by averting that sages commit to the task of moderation on burial and expenditure.

He pitches his debate against lavish burial by refuting the stance of the Ruists and Mohists, whom Wang Chong believes should be responsible for the lavish burial practices in their own ways:

然而世尚厚葬,有奢泰之失者,儒家論不明,墨家議之非故也。墨家之議右鬼,以為人死輒為鬼而有知,能形而害人,故引杜伯之類以為效驗。儒家不從,以為死人無知,不能為鬼,然而賻祭備物者,示不負死以觀生也。(Huang 1990: 961)

However, the reason that today's world values lavish burials and is faulted for over-extravagance is that the Ru school's arguments are equivocal and the Mo school is wrong. Arguments of the Mo school prize ghosts, believing that when people die, they become ghosts and possess the power of sentience, and could assume physical form to harm living persons. So that they adduce stories like that of Du Bo as verification. The Ru school does not agree. They think the dead are not sentient and cannot become ghosts. But they provide goods for sacrifices to show that they do not abandon the dead in favor of the living. (Translated by the author of this article)

The problem with the Ru school is that they are equivocal on this matter. Although they do not believe that the dead can turn into sentient ghosts, they are reluctant to clarify their stance for fear of starting the beginning against filial duties. The internal tension between advocating a non-ghost stance and emphasis on filial duties in the Ru school's teaching is what holds it back from clarifying this matter. Wang Chong cites an anecdote of Kongzi as an example to show that it can be difficult for even sages with good intention to achieve their original goal if he sticks to the "halfway position":

魯人將以璵璠斂,孔子聞之,徑庭麗級而諫。夫徑庭麗級,非禮也,孔子為救患也。患之所由,常由有所貪。璵璠,寶物也,魯人用斂,姦人憫之,欲心生矣。姦人欲生,不畏罪法。不畏罪法,則丘墓扣矣。孔子睹微見著,故徑庭麗級,以救患直諫。夫不明死人無知之義,而著丘墓必扣之諫,雖盡比干之執人,人必不聽何則? 諸侯財多不憂貧,威彊不懼扣。死人之議,狐疑未定;孝子之計,從其重者。如明死人無知,厚葬無益,論定議立,較著可聞,則璵璠之禮不行,徑庭之諫不發矣。(Huang 1990: 963-964)

People in the state of Lu were planning to put yufan "precious jade for kings" in the coffin of "Ji Pingzi 季平子". When Kongzi heard about it, he crossed the courtyard right through and climbed one step at a time to advise against "this decision". That crossing the courtyard right through and climbing one step at a time was against the norm of ritual but Kongzi was to prevent the immediate danger. The danger usually comes from people's greed. Yufan is a precious thing, and Lu people put it into the coffin. Vile persons' greed will burgeon when they set their eyes on it. And when their greed burgeons, they are not afraid of punishment. If

they are not afraid of punishment, then the tomb will be robbed. Kongzi saw the big picture from the small details, so he crossed the courtyard right through and climbed one step at a time to advise against the decision to prevent danger. But by advising on the grounds that the tomb will be robbed, rather than elucidating that the dead are not sentient, even if Kongzi is as loyal as Bi Gan, people will not be easily convinced. Why is that? The feudal lords have more than enough treasure to worry about destitution. They are so powerful that they do not worry about their tombs being robbed. Since the arguments about death and the afterlife are vague and not clarified, the filial sons still choose lavish burials. If put clear that the dead are not sentient, and there is no point in lavish burials, then the arguments can be settled in a way that is evident and feasible. Then the ritual of using yufan can be stopped, and the rushing advice will no longer be necessary. (Translated by the author of this article)

In Wang Chong's eyes, dissuading the people of Lu from putting the precious yufan in the coffin is not enough to argue against on the grounds that it invites tomb robbery. But powerful families are too confident and rich to be afraid of tomb robbery. So, advice on this ground can hardly deter filial sons from lavish spending for funerals. The correct and the only way that can solve the problem once and for all is to tell people the truth that the dead is not sentient, so he is not able to appreciate the precious jade in the afterlife, and will not be angry if people of Lu do not do so, then there is no point in putting it the coffin.

The main reason accounting for Ru school's reluctance to "tell the truth" is their concern for filial piety. They fear that if the distrust in ancestral ghosts spreads, the consequences would be more threatening to society than simply financial waste. As Wang Chong notes, they fear that if they publicize the knowledge of the dead not possessing sentience, then ministers betray their lord and sons betray their fathers.

Wang Chong is scornful of this "halfway position" that keeps the "truth" at bay and refrains from discourses about it. In his eyes, such concern for filial piety is unnecessary because the merits outweigh the benefits.

The problem of the Mo school is their self-contradictory position on the ghost, i. e., they proclaim the existence of sentient and baleful ghosts while advocating thrifty burials at the same time, which cannot coexist. As Wang Chong argues,

墨家之議,自違其術,其薄葬而又右鬼。右鬼引效,以杜伯為驗。杜伯死人,如謂杜伯為鬼,則夫死者審有知。如有知而薄葬之,是怒死人也。人情欲厚而惡薄,以薄受死者之責,雖右鬼,其何益哉?如以鬼非死人,則其信杜伯非也;如以鬼是死人,則其薄葬非也。術用乖錯,首尾相違,故以為非。(Huang 1990: 966-967)

The arguments of the Mo school are self-contradictory because it advocates thrifty burial and prizes ghosts at the same time. To prize ghosts, they cite Du Bo as an example. Du Bo is dead. If Du Bo is a ghost, then the dead are indeed sentient. If the dead has sentience and gives them thrifty burials, this is to infuriate the dead. Human affections prefer abundance and hate scarcity. It is to be blamed by the dead for providing too little, even if still prizing ghosts. What good does it do? If ghosts are not "transformed from" dead persons, then it is wrong to believe that Du Bo turns into ghost after death. If ghosts are indeed "transformed from" dead persons, then it is wrong to use thrifty burials. The principles contradict concrete methods and the head

does not tally with the tail. That is why they are wrong. (Translated by the author of this article)

What goes wrong, according to Wang Chong, is their methodology in ascertaining truth. If arguments do not pay attention to the essence to investigate meaning, and only ascertain right and wrong by exterior verifications without resorting to the inner mechanism, then they are arguments of ears and eyes, not arguments of the heart and mind. To use arguments of ears and eyes are to speak for the false phenomena. The false phenomena are considered right, then the facts are considered false. So that, to tell the truth or false things, one needs not only ears and eyes, but also needs to use his mind and heart. According to Wang Chong, Mo school's arguments do not make use of the mind but resort to what they see and hear. So that their arguments may be verified (by their criteria) but still evades truth. The unfaithful is hard to promulgate. Although it caters to ignorant people, it is not fit for the mind of wise people.

After enumerating the wrongs of the Ruists and Mohists, Wang Chong critiques their huge influence on lavish funeral practices and the huge necessary burden felt in every spectrum of social class, especially the poor. And he genuinely wishes that his arguments put an end to these practices.

Behind the preparation and rituals of funerals are the projections of contemporary understanding of fundamental notions such as death and the afterlife. Despite many a modern scholarly endeavor to reconcile divergent and sometimes conflicting versions of the Han conceptions of the human soul and its post-mortem destination, found mostly in received literature but also increasingly in archaeological finds (such as tomb reliefs, paintings, funerary texts), and to reconstruct a neat theory that claims to dominate the Chinese mind, there remains much controversy over the validity for the search for such a theory. A spectrum of interpretations available to us can sometimes be very confusing.

Take the example of souls. Theories on the constituents of the soul in early writings are so vague and inconsistent that one wonders if there is indeed one shared belief that percolates through all social strata.

In tracing the evolutions of the concept of the soul and afterlife in early China, Yu Ying-shi's article in the 1980s was seminal in facilitating further studies and discussions. Culling from patchy textual occurrences, he traces the different origins of the concept of "hun" and "po", and surmises that the idea of "po" representing the human soul predates the notion of *hun*, which he speculates was more fully developed in the south and then spread to the north sometime during the sixth century and that in the southern tradition, the *hun* was regarded as a more active and vital soul than the *po*.

When correlative thinking, with the idea that "yinyang" and "wuxing" (Five Phases) became popular in the fourth century BCE, Yu packed the Hun-Po dualism with Yin-Yang and Xing (shape)-Qi (air) dualism and argued for the "universality of the distinction between the "hun" and "po" in Han China, the former being a spiritual soul and the latter a bodily soul". (Yu 1987: 378)

Since Yu's article, several responses by other scholars challenge this neat Hun-Po dualism and its "universality" from different angles. Mark Anna Seidel takes the matter with the dichotomy of "hun" and "po" through her studies of Han funerary texts and demonstrates that "the souls do not separate at death but "hun" and "po" together descend into the mountain netherworld." (Seidel 1987: 705) Wu Hung objects to Yu's using the shaky hun-po dualism as a premise to interpret the famous T-shape painting from Mawangdui tomb no. 1 and argues that it "neither functioned to summon the of the dead nor depicted as the soul's journey to Heaven". (Wu

1992: 112) A more detailed and acute rebuttal of the Hun-Po dualism by Brashier calls into question Yu's misreading of the texts in a number of cases. In Brashier's words, ...hunpo dualism, at best, belongs to the realm of scholasticism and not general belief on death. Most non-literati and some literati sources tend to use these terms generically and interchangeably and usually refer to a single entity distinct from the body. (Brashier 2014: 138)

Corroborating the arguments above, Wang Chong's usage of "hun" and "po" also does not seem to treat them as two different entities and they are often used interchangeably. In his tirades against lavish burials, he also comments that when people should just be buried "under the Yellow Springs" because

黄泉之下，非人所居，然而葬之不疑者，以死绝异处，不可同也。(Huang 1990: 961)

Although Yellow springs are no place for a man to live, the reason why people are still buried there without hesitation is that the place for the dead should be separated and should not mix with the living world. (Translated by the author of this article)

For Wang Chong, who is overtly concerned with the secular world, the constituents of the soul and the destination of the post-mortem journey are not his primary interest.

3 Conclusion

This paper has delineated and examined Wang Chong's arguments on the thorny issues of ghosts and thrifty burials. In the chapter "Lun si", Wang Chong refutes the three dominant views of his time, i. e., that after death, people become ghosts, possess sentience and are capable of harming living persons, by way of vivid analogy and careful reasoning. He convincingly argues that on the contrary, after death, people do not become ghosts, do not possess the power of sentience and are not capable of harming living persons. He goes in the chapter "Si wei" to falsify historical evidence adduced by his opponents, to further support his theoretical framework laid out in "Lun si". However, in the chapter "Ding gui", Wang Chong admits the difficulty in applying reason and experiment to determine the truth about death. His compromise has contradicted his own analysis and has led to conceptual quagmires. His stance on the ghost in these three chapters has paved the way for his advocating thrifty burial in the chapter "Bo zang". Why should funerals be frugal? Wang Chong's answer is, most important of all, grounded in his previous treatment of ghosts. If ghosts are not sentient, there is no extra significance in funeral expenditure. People's soul, a notion he usually equates with the essential *qi*, goes out to the universe after the corruption of the bodily form, which stays under the Yellow Springs. In all, in his treatment of the issues of the afterlife, death and funerals, Wang Chong's arguments are organized in a coherent and brilliant way, which still resonates today.

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