



The Dragon Slayer

When Heaven and Earth come together, all things are spontaneously produced. Heaven does not become a farmer or a mulberry girl for the sake of man.

Wang Chong

THE HAN DYNASTY (206 BCE-220 CE) is widely regarded to be the first ‘Golden Age’ of ancient China, establishing the foundational political, cultural, and ethnic identity of modern China.

And yet, it was also a time when tradition and superstition still dominated Chinese thought, with scant attention given to new ideas or even solid, physical evidence.

Omens and divinations were commonplace, and relying on the classic writings of Confucius, scholars made fanciful connections between cosmological and human events. (Earthquakes, for example, were the result of the ‘Great Turtle’ turning over or the ‘Dragon King’ growing angry.)

Wang Chong was born into this credulous, anti-rational atmosphere in 27 CE, the son of poor parents living in a small village in Shangyu, in modern-day Zhejiang province.

Not much is known about Wang’s childhood, although he described himself as an orphan and his family as rebellious, lower-class troublemakers, forced to move several times before finally settling in Shangyu.

Wang was educated at home in writing and character recognition, and displayed an early interest in literature. At age seven, he was accepted into a private school to study calligraphy, becoming the only one of over a hundred students to achieve perfect scores.

Around the age of 18, Wang moved to the capital, Luoyang, to study at the Imperial Academy, becoming a disciple of Ban Biao. It is said that during this time, Wang stood for hours at bookstalls in order to read and memorize books he couldn’t afford to buy.

After completing his studies, Wang went on to take up various low and mid-level bureaucratic positions in the provincial Chinese government, but left in 59 CE after repeated disagreements with his superiors.

Returning to his hometown, he taught and wrote several books of philosophy and science, including what would become his magnum opus, the 85 chapter-long *Lunheng* (*Critical Essays*), completed around 80 CE.

True to its title, the *Lunheng* was a masterwork of critical and original thinking, exploring diverse subjects ranging from geology, meteorology and genetics to ethics, philosophy, mortality and religion.

Two millennia before the discovery of tectonic plates, Wang ridiculed the belief that earthquakes were caused by human misbehavior or a dragon's temper tantrums: "Fools, they are the ground itself moving!"

Wang accurately described the water cycle, attributing rain to evaporation and condensation in clouds, in a time when it was believed to magically fall from Heaven.

He maintained that natural disasters were not intentional efforts of the gods to punish or warn humans, as Confucian philosophy claimed, but were simply dispassionate, spontaneous, random events in Nature.

An atheist at a time when religious belief was nearly universal, Wang sought to rid people of their fear of ghosts and the afterlife. While acknowledging that souls and spirits might exist in some form, he described death as being merely "like a fire going out," and mortality as inescapable.

By depicting both revered ages like Confucius and emperors as mere mortals rather than divine beings, he earned enemies in political and religious circles. In his later years, he declined an invitation to serve under Emperor Zhang of the Han Dynasty.

Perhaps sensing danger, Wang relocated his family to Yangzhou in 86 CE. Not long after composing one of his final works, the 16-volume *Yangxing* (*Nourishing Life*) - a treatise on Traditional Chinese Medicine and Taoism which sadly, has since been lost - Wang Chong died at 73 after a long illness.

20th century scholar Zhang Taiyan praised Wang Chong, writing, "The Han Dynasty produced one man, sufficient to shake off its shame. Even today, few can match him."

Despite being described by one modern historian as "the most rebellious, skeptical and critical spirit in China at the beginning of the first millennium," Wang was largely ignored during his lifetime, only becoming consequential in China in recent times.

A naturalist and rationalist, Wang could even be said to be an early proponent of the scientific method, asserting that "knowledge is power" and insisting upon the necessity of supporting any intellectual theory with concrete evidence and experimental proof.

If Wang had a notable shortcoming, it was his belief in what is now known by the term 'determinism,' the idea that everything is preordained by fate and something that human intervention can do little to change.

While Confucianism supported superstitions like numerology, divination, and omens as a means to predict one's fate, and Wang's Taoist, reactionary philosophy severed the causal relationship between personal moral cultivation and good or bad fortune, it tended to support a similarly irrational view and encouraged a passive attitude toward life.

But perhaps it's too much to expect one man's thinking, however groundbreaking, to transcend the limitations of his time. As historian Edward Gibbon wrote of the Byzantine general Belisarius, "His virtues were his own, his vices those of the age." ■