A Humanist Reading of Wang Chong’s Defence of Divination

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Abstract
In this article, I present a new perspective on the thought of Wang Chong (王充, 27 CE – ca 97 CE) by drawing on Chung-Ying Cheng’s understanding of inclusive or intrinsic humanism. Specifically, I show how this type of humanism is reflected in Wang’s defence of divination and how his reinterpretation of the concepts of spontaneity (ziran 自然), endowment (ming 命), and natural disposition (xing 性) provide insights into the capabilities, concerns, and role of humans in the universe. Additionally, I describe the importance of ontocosmological humility in divination and inclusive humanism, then discuss how such a disposition or virtue figures in the modern scientific literature. While I offer a humanist reading of Wang’s defence of divination in this article, I also argue that ontocosmological humility can guide humans in making responsible actions and transforming themselves, other creatures, and the universe.

Keywords: Wang Chong, divination, humanism, inclusive humanism, ontocosmological humility

Humanistično branje Wang Chongovega zagovarjanja vedeževanja

Izvleček
V prispevku predstavim nov pogled na misel Wang Chonga (王充, 27–97), pri čemer se opiram na Cheng Chung Yingovo razumevanje vključujočega ali imanentnega humanizma. Še posebej prikažem, kako se ta vrsta humanizma odraža v Wangovem zagovarjanju vedeževanja in kako njegova reinterpretacija konceptov pristnosti (ziran 自然), usode (ming 命) in naravne dispozicije (xing 性) ponudi vpogled v sposobnosti, skrbi in vlogo človeka v univerzumu. Hkrati prikažem tudi pomembnost ontokozmološke skromnosti v vedeževanju in vključujočem humanizmu ter razpravljam, kako se tovrstna dispozicija ali vrline pojavljajo v sodobni znanstveni literaturi. Medtem ko v prispevku podajam humanistično branje Wangovega zagovarjanja vedeževanja, trdim tudi, da lahko ontokozmološka skromnost usmerja človeka pri odgovornih dejanjih ter preoblikovanju samega sebe, drugih bitij in celotnega univerzuma.

Ključne besede: Wang Chong, vedeževanje, humanizem, vključujoči humanizem, ontokozmološka skromnost

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Introduction

Humanism generally emphasizes human capabilities, interests, and concerns, which are identified by their place, role, or position in the universe. According to Chung-Ying Cheng (1972, 158‒59; 1998, 211‒13), there are two types of humanism. The first, called exclusive humanism, affirms the superiority and central position of humans in the universe. This type is prevalent in Western philosophy and may also be referred to as extrinsic humanism, human-centred rationalism, anthropological egoism, or human chauvinism. The second type, inclusive or intrinsic humanism, suggests the coordinating or harmonizing power of humanity. Humans do not hold a central position but share roles with other creatures in the universe, and Chinese philosophy predominantly embraces this type of humanism. In one of his works, Cheng (1998) explores the inclusive humanism present in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism and examines its relationship to environmental problems.¹

In this article, I explore the thought of Wang Chong (王充, 27 CE‒ca 97 CE), an important thinker during the Eastern Han dynasty. I show that inclusive or intrinsic humanism is also reflected in his collection of writings: the *Lunheng* (論衡).² More specifically, I emphasize Wang’s defence of divination, one of the instances where he deals with and rectifies the concerns or practices of his society.³ In this defence, he offers an interpretation of spontaneity (*ziran* 自然), and endowment (*ming* 命) in relation to natural disposition (*xing* 性). These concepts are not only meaningful in his defence of divination, but they are also helpful in reflecting on the place of humans in the universe. Moreover, I describe the importance of ontocosmological humility in divination and inclusive humanism, then discuss how such a disposition or virtue figures in modern scientific literature. In brief, as I offer a humanist reading of Wang’s defence of divination in order to rethink the role or position of humans in the universe, I also argue that ontocosmological humility can guide humans in making responsible actions and transforming themselves, other creatures, and the universe. This article is divided into the following sections: “Divination and Humanism”; “Ziran: The Equality of

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¹ Cheng (1998) argues that exclusive humanism has detrimental effects on the environment while inclusive humanism provides an alternative in the context of environmental problems. Through his exploration of inclusive humanism in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, Cheng seeks to articulate a cosmo-eco-ethics or a cosmo-ethics that is at the same time an ecological cosmology.

² Alfred Forke (1907; 1962) translated this surviving work of Wang into English. For citation purposes, I abbreviate it as *LH*. I also cite it according to the arrangement of the translator. Since there are two parts or volumes of the translation, I will indicate the part. Hence, *LH* I or II: page number/s.

³ In addition to his defence, Wang also expressed criticisms of divination (see Cabural 2023).
Divination and Humanism

Lisa Raphals (2013, 1) defines divination as “a deliberate search for understanding of the hidden significance of events in the future, present, or past”. Wang’s writings about some forms of divination—the use of milfoil stalks, the use of shells of tortoises, anthroposcopy or physiognomy, and the appearance of omens or portents—fit within this definition.4 Firstly, Wang acknowledges that humans deliberately search for omens and other signs, but he also recognizes the limitations of human knowledge, which can lead to misinterpretation of these signs (LH I: 189). And secondly, he emphasizes that the uniqueness of omens is dependent on time, meaning that omens from the past may not be the same as those in the present or future (LH II: 192‒200). Raphals’s definition is notable for including all aspects of time, i.e., the past, present, and future, representing a significant departure from the typical view that divination is only concerned with predicting future events (e.g., Cicero De Divinatione Book I, par. 1).5

In the past, divination was a crucial practice for the ancients, serving as a means to navigate both personal and public (or socio-politico-religious) concerns. Personal concerns, for instance, include knowing about one’s individual endowment, such as the duration of one’s life and physical strength, whether one will be successful in a career and be wealthy, or one’s status in society (LH I: 144).6 With regard to public concerns, a well-known example is when the Zhou Dynasty justified their decision to overthrow the Shang Dynasty by invoking the Mandate of Heaven (天命). The rulers of Zhou discovered the Mandate through the process of divination by interpreting natural signs. As a rule, if Heaven approves of the government, it manifests in nature’s harmony and peace; if Heaven disapproves, it is expressed through anomalies and natural disasters (Smith 1991, 18). These examples illustrate how divination played a critical role in both personal and public concerns, implying that this practice is relevant to the discourse on humanism.

4 In my previous works on Wang, I discussed the absence of a unifying term to describe these practices. In other words, he did not employ a term that can be neatly translated as divination (Cabural 2020, 10; 2023, 2).

5 This important work of Cicero entitled De Divinatione (On Divination) is composed of two books, and I use the translation by William Armistead Falconer published in the Loeb Classical Library series. I will indicate the book number and the paragraph (par.) number instead of the pages.

6 It is important to note here that Wang also discussed the destiny or decree of the state, which is different from personal or individual endowment (LH I: 137).
Divination offered guidance on how to live, revealed what was within and beyond human control, and shed light on the place of humans in the universe.

Divination posits the important connection between cosmology and ethics. This connection is at the core of Cheng’s discussion of cosmo-ethics as the ethics of inclusive humanism. According to him (Cheng 1998, 216), cosmo-ethics “means that, as humans, we must think, act, plan, and decide with this vision of present and future harmony of nature always in mind”. Cosmology is the study of the universe, including its origin, possible forces that govern it, and the creatures or entities that reside or constitute the universe. Simply put, cosmology identifies the condition and mechanism of the place where humans are part of and where they reside. Ethics focuses on how humans should adapt to and live according to the conditions and mechanisms identified in the study of the universe. Divination, in general, proceeds from the cosmological understanding that there exists a higher power or authority than humans, such as God, Heaven, the universe, fate or endowment, or chance. Divination thus opposes the human-centeredness of exclusive humanism as it acknowledges that humans are not the sole masters of their lives and the universe.

Wang’s understanding of divination differs from the commonly held belief before and during his time, which anthropomorphized or attributed human characteristics to Heaven. Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, 179 BCE–104 BCE), a Western Han dynasty thinker and also the proponent of the notion of the unity between Heaven and humanity (tianrenheyi 天人合一), held this view. According to Dong, Heaven is the origin, supreme ancestor, and the source of the humanness of humans, and since this is the case, “human beings are elevated to be categorized with Heaven” (Dong 2016, 363). As a result, humans were considered outstanding and favoured more than any other creatures in the universe. The unity or interaction between Heaven and humanity was fundamental to Dong’s understanding of divination, where Heaven communicated messages to humans, and humans (especially the sage-ruler) could interpret these in the form of natural disasters and bizarre events (ibid., 322).

Wang, who is critical of the anthropomorphized interpretation of Heaven and how it is commonly used to explain divination (see LH I: 92, 182–83), suggests and reinterprets the concept of spontaneity as a fundamental cosmological principle or the principle of Heaven. This concept is also integral to his understanding of divination. For instance, Wang views individual endowment as spontaneously generated and asserts that it can be known through some forms of divination by means of inspecting one’s physical appearance or the structure of the bones (LH I: 130–38, 304–12). Moreover, the ethical significance of the cosmological principle
of spontaneity and the concept of endowment is noteworthy, as they challenge prevalent ethical notions such as freedom, fatalism, and determinism. These points will be further examined in the succeeding parts of this article. Consistent with the principle of spontaneity or the spontaneous generation of things, Wang emphasizes that humans are part of a single larger whole, stating “that man is created as one of the ten thousand creatures” (LH I: 202). This point also suggests that humans have fundamental similarities with other creatures, and Wang notes that they share common natural processes and inhabit the same environment. As the text states, a “man has birth and death, and so other creatures have a beginning and an end. He is active, and so other creatures have their work likewise...They have the same Heaven, the same Earth, and they look equally up at the sun and the moon” (LH I: 528). To summarize, the cosmological principle of spontaneity, which places humans among other creatures, can provide a basis for understanding how humans ought to live and conduct themselves within the universe and how they should regard other creatures.

The main difference between Dong and Wang lies in their conception of Heaven, which fashioned their views of humans, divination, and so on. Nevertheless, both theories can be viewed as forms of inclusive humanism. It can be argued that inclusive humanism is particularly evident in the concept of tianrenheyi, which explicitly acknowledges the unity between Heaven and humanity and implies the potential of humans to harmonize with the universe—a fundamental aspect of inclusive humanism (Cheng 1998, 222). The idea that Heaven sends messages to humans is also a clear indication of divination. However, I would like to point out that despite the lack of an anthropomorphized conception of Heaven and the potential categorization of humans with it, divination and inclusive humanism are still feasible, as in the case of Wang. This means that humans can still interpret various signs through different forms of divination, although these signs do not necessarily or directly originate from Heaven. Humans can also live in harmony with the spontaneous Heaven and other creatures. The succeeding parts of this article will clarify these points.

**Ziran:** The Equality of Things and Its Role in Divination

The Lunheng contains one significant chapter titled Ziran, devoted solely to explaining this concept (LH I: 92–102). In addition, there are various allusions to ziran or spontaneity in other chapters of the same volume, indicating its crucial role in the philosophical thought of Wang (Wang, Bao and Guan 2020, 233; The editorial board of Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture 2015, 129–30). In
his understanding, *ziran* is the principle of Heaven and is fundamental in explaining the mechanism of the universe. Heaven is the origin of things or the spontaneous natural agent (McLeod 2018, 186). However, the term agent as employed here does not imply that Heaven has an intention or care for humans, things, and other creatures, but instead refers to its indispensable role in accordance with the principle of spontaneity. In fact, this conception of Heaven as spontaneous lies at the core of Wang’s arguments against the notion of an anthropomorphized Heaven and divination.

By incorporating the concept of *qi* (氣), Wang interprets *ziran* as *qi*-transformation (Wang, Bao and Guan 2020, 234). There are various meanings and kinds of *qi*, but in this context it refers to the principal *qi* (*yuan qi 元氣*), which was introduced by Dong. This principal *qi* is regarded as “the original substance (*wu zhi 物質*) for the creation of the universe” (ibid., 180; also see Fung 1953, 19‒20). Wang views principal *qi* as the origin of things and describes it as “placid, tranquil, desireless, inactive, and unbusied” (*LH* I: 93). According to him, “by the fusion of the [*qi*] of Heaven [*tian*] and Earth [*di*] all things of the world are produced spontaneously [*ziran*], just as by the mixture of the [*qi*] of husband and wife children are born spontaneously” (*LH* I: 92). As mentioned in the preceding part, this generation process also includes humans (*LHI*: 202).

My main emphasis on the principle of *ziran* is the equality of things. Here, I follow Aristotle’s distinction of numerical and proportional equality (Aristotle 2001, 1130b‒1132b; also see Li 2012, 196‒297). Numerical equality proceeds from a non-discriminatory standpoint, which means that it does not pay attention to the circumstances or factors of the parties involved. It contrasts with proportional equality, which takes into account individual circumstances or factors. Notably, Chenyang Li (2012, 297‒301) identifies two instances of numerical equality in the context of Confucian ethics. The first pertains to the equal capacity of humans for moral cultivation, while the second refers to the equality that exists in social roles, meaning that all humans are accountable or have responsibilities to fulfil. For Wang the equality of things is an example of numerical equality, which can be called ontocosmological equality, and has ethical significance. Ontocosmological equality refers to the idea that all creatures, regardless of their size, species, or status, are equally subject to the same process of generation and degeneration and share the same natural environment (for example, see *LHI*: 92, 202, 528). This is

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7 *Qi* is one of the most important concepts in Chinese philosophy, “referring to the refined and miniscule elements which constitute the myriad things of Heaven and Earth” (Wang, Bao and Guan 2020, 177).

8 I borrow the term ontocosmology from Cheng (1998, 217). It refers to the interrelatedness of the natures of the universe and the human being.
one of the instances where we can recognize the in-between-ness or among-ness of humans, as they are both among and one with other creatures in the universe because of their fundamental similarities.

The ethical significance of this ontocosmological equality is that humans must recognize the fundamental similarities among all creatures and use this as a basis for relating to them. Environmental and ecological problems have arisen because humans have failed to understand their similarities and interconnectedness with other creatures. This is evident in cases where scientific and technological advancements, thought to be beneficial for humans, have had adverse effects on other creatures. Additionally, the misuse or abuse of other things or creatures, such as trees and vegetation, which are not merely resources for human use but vital components of the universe and essential for the existence of diverse forms of life, is a related concern. Practices like deforestation have far-reaching effects that ultimately impact human lives. To relate to other generated things or creatures, humans must recognize and affirm their intrinsic value. As Cheng (1998, 215) argues in the context of inclusive humanism, “each and every thing has an intrinsic value, value in the sense of being able to form a mutually enriching or mutually strengthening relationship among things contributing to the total unity and harmony among things in reality”.

*Ziran* is a fundamental concept in Wang’s defence of divination. Divinatory signs, like other things or creatures, are spontaneously generated. This means that signs are not sent by Heaven and are not expressions or indications of its interest or care for humans and their undertakings. To clarify this point, let us examine omens or portents, which are spontaneous and natural. In this context, the terms “spontaneous” and “natural” are practically interchangeable, as they may both refer to one and the same thing. However, what is worth noting is how the term “natural” is contrasted with the term “artificial”. According to Wang (*LH I*: 97), a dummy or replica is not spontaneously generated, but rather it is artificial because it is purposefully created by humans, making it vulnerable or easily destructible. In contrast, omens are natural and cannot be easily destroyed. In fact, they are inherently natural since humans cannot create them on purpose—they are spontaneously generated. This contrast between artificial and natural partly explains why Wang (*LH I*: 183) criticizes other forms of divination, such as the use of bones of animals and the use of stalks, because they are done artificially or are induced deliberately by human practitioners. To further illustrate that omens (i.e., the signs of auspicious and inauspicious events) are natural, Wang presents an analogy, describing them as similar to the flushed colour on a human face. He (*LH I*: 102) states:
... [the signs of] auspicious and inauspicious events are like the flushed colour appearing on the face. Man cannot produce it, the colour comes out of itself. Heaven and Earth are like the human body, the transformation of their \[qi\], like the flushed colour. How can Heaven and Earth cause the sudden change of their \[qi\], since man cannot produce the flushed colour? The change of the \[qi\] is spontaneous, it appears of itself, as the colour comes out of itself.

This passage describes how omens are understood in terms of the concept of \(qi\)-transformation, which affirms that they are spontaneously generated. It is noteworthy that Wang differs from the Literati’s view that omens must be standardized, meaning that the same omens that appeared in the past should appear in the present to indicate or signify a period of universal peace (\(taiping\) \(太平\)) (\(LH\) Part II, 192). He argues against this view by emphasizing the unique and unusual nature of spontaneously generated omens, stating that they need not be identical (\(LH\) II: 195‒96). Furthermore, since omens are spontaneously generated, Wang (\(LH\) II: 315) asserts that “ominous things partly exist and partly do not exist”.

As we consider inclusive humanism in this article, it is relevant to ask whether divinatory signs, such as omens or portents, possess intrinsic value. To respond to this question, it is important to recall how Wang describes omens in relation to universal peace. In his words (\(LH\) II: 192‒93):

Universal peace manifests itself by the establishment of the government, when the people respond, by being cheerful and at ease...The people being at ease, the Yin and the Yang are in harmony, and when they harmonize all things grow and develop such being the case, strange omens come forth...Being at ease, it is at peace, and then even the absence of omens would not be hurtful to the peaceful state...Sometimes all may be in perfect order, but there are no witnesses to prove it...A wise ruler in his administration aims at universal peace, and it is not indispensable that there should be corresponding omens.

What is implied here is the unnecessary role of omens or divination in general (Cabural 2023, 11‒12). This, however, did not hinder Wang from discussing such a topic since, according to him, “though of no great importance, these arts are also derived from the sages, which has often been overlooked” (\(LH\) II: 104). His intention is to rectify misconceptions or misinterpretations rather than deny the possibility of omens or divination. In a state of universal peace, omens and other unusual creatures are not necessary to achieve such a state. In fact, they are derivative; they just appear when such a state has been achieved. While universal peace
may generate omens, it is not the case that omens may generate universal peace. In this regard, omens, essentially signs or signals, do not have intrinsic value. Broadly speaking, signs do not have intrinsic value since they point to something else, which may suggest their value is instrumental. However, from the point of view of inclusive humanism, omens have intrinsic value since they are spontaneously generated and can aid in understanding the state of things, even though they serve an instrumental purpose. They may not constantly be present, but omens are meaningful when they exist. While it is also true that omens are not necessary to achieve harmony or universal peace, they are not entirely negligible because their presence or absence can affect the interpretation of events and the state of society. When humans disagree about the nature and meaning of omens, it may yield confusion. This is the very historical context of Wang, where there is confusion or disagreement about whether their period achieved a state of universal peace. Consequently, this issue affected how their sovereigns and sages were perceived (LH II: 192–200; Puett 2005/2006, 275; Raphals 2012).

An important component of Wang’s defence of divination and repudiation of an anthropomorphized conception of Heaven is his assertion about the difference between Heaven and humanity. According to him, unlike humans with sensory organs enabling them to develop desires, Heaven is without purpose or desire (LH I: 92–93). This is the reason why Heaven – being spontaneous, incorporeal, and without purpose and desire – cannot respond to the wishes of humans, which is thought to be possible in the practice of divination by milfoil and tortoises. Moreover, this difference does not deny the possibility of unity or harmony between Heaven and humanity, which indicates inclusive humanism (Cheng 1998, 222). Wang argues that “a man with the highest, purest, and fullest virtue has been endowed with a large quantity of [qi], therefore he can follow the example of Heaven, and be spontaneous and inactive like it” (LH I: 97). Here, Wang refers to sovereign or sage rulers as people who are endowed with a generous amount of qi. He considers them as the necessary and sufficient condition to achieve universal peace, as they can effectively interpret omens and other signs due to their effective use of analogies and retrospective or holistic thinking (LH II: 117; also see Puett, 2005/2006, 274). It is, therefore, through the sovereign or sage rulers that the unity between Heaven and humanity becomes possible. It is worth noting that although Wang’s views are opposed to Dong in various ways, both thinkers agree on the importance of the sovereign or sage rulers in the unity or harmony between Heaven and humanity. As Dong (2016, 399) states, “when the ancients invented writing, they drew three [horizontal] lines that they connected through the centre [by a vertical stroke] and called this ‘king.’ These three lines represent Heaven, Earth, and humankind, and the line that connects them through the centre unifies their Way.”
**Ming, Xing, and Transformation**

Wang’s understanding of *ziran* and repudiation of the anthropomorphized conception of Heaven shape his interpretation of *ming* or endowment as devoid of “any sense of divine demands” (Cai 2005, 180). In its early usage, *ming* meant mandate and was somewhat synonymous with *ling* ( Ordenance), which denotes Heaven as the source of mandate or command, implying the Mandate of Heaven (Wang, Bao and Guan 2020, 45). However, for Wang, Heaven is not the source of *ming* since it is essentially without intention or desire and operates according to *ziran*. This suggests that *ming* is spontaneously generated like other things or creatures (*LH* I: 130). While the concept of *ming* contains politico-religious significance and Wang also refers in passing to the destiny or decree of the state, I intend to emphasize his insight into individual endowment, which is crucial to his understanding of humans (*LH* I: 137). Contrary to the common view that the concept of endowment is simply tantamount to fatalism and determinism, we can read in Wang that there is still room for human capabilities and transformation, as humans have the ability to affect change in themselves and other things around them.

One striking aspect of Wang’s interpretation of *ming* is that it is embedded in the human body and in *xing* or natural disposition (Raphals 2003, 551).9 With regard to the embeddedness of *ming* in the human body, it has been stated that a “man shows by his appearance, whether he will die old or young, and there are signs indicating, whether he will be rich or poor, high-placed or base. All this is to be seen from his body” (*LH* I: 137). This passage presents two types of *ming*—the first pertains to social status and wealth or fortune, and the second refers to the span or duration of one’s life (see also *LH* I: 144 and 313). It is in this regard that the question of whether Wang promoted fatalism or the existence of predetermined events which are immutable arises (see discussion of Song 2018, 170). Arguably, he may not have been considered as promoting fatalism if he just referred to the duration of life because there can be signs that can inform us about it, and to live a short or long time is also a fact of being human. The issue, however, becomes more complicated if we think about how bodily signs are interpreted in relation to the duration of life. There may be instances where there is no logical or direct connection between the sign and the interpretation, such as by determining the duration of life according to ear length or lines on the palm. But there can also be instances

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9 Raphals, alluding to how *ming* is discussed in the *Lunheng*, identifies three innovations. According to her (Raphals 2003, 551), “innovations in the *Lunheng* discussion of *ming* focus on clusters of terms: the interrelations of *ming* and the opportune moment (*shì*), the embedding of *ming* in inner nature (*xing*) and the visible body (*tì*), and a new distinction between luck and chance".
wherein signs are logically explained or directly connected to the duration of one's life. For instance, when medical doctors predict the lifespans of patients due to their conditions, although they are not always guaranteed. Here, it is important to note that medical science during Wang's time was not as advanced as what we have today. For example, when diseases or abnormal signs appeared, people might just have accepted them and simply conjectured the number of days a person was expected to live. But now there are various ways to deal with diseases to prolong life. We also have more compelling reasons to explain the relationship between diseases or bodily signs and the duration of life. Wang's inclusion of endowment in terms of wealth and honour could be seen as promoting fatalism. However, this contradicts reality since there are many examples of people who have risen from unfortunate circumstances through dedication and determination.

With regard to the embeddedness of ming in xing or disposition, these aspects of human life are both obtained at birth, but this does not mean that they must correspond to each other. According to Wang, "[one's] disposition may be good, but his [endowment] unlucky, or his disposition bad, and his [endowment] lucky. Good and bad actions are the result of natural disposition, happiness and misfortune, good and bad luck are [endowment]" (LH I: 139). Their non-correspondence refers to the absence of causal relation between human action and happiness or the feeling of misery. This seems reasonable, since it does not follow that when humans face unfortunate endowments such as short duration of life or low ranks in society that these are outcomes of their bad conduct. Likewise, it does not follow that a fortunate endowment results from good conduct. There are indeed instances of humans with a good disposition, yet they lived a short but meaningful life. Meanwhile, it is interesting to relate this point to Wang's criticism of wrong views about natural occurrences. During his time, it was a common understanding that when a man was killed by lighting, it was because of his hidden faults, and the deep rolling sound of thunder is a manifestation of the anger of Heaven which is akin to the gasping and breathing of humans when they are angry. Wang (LH

10 The relationship between ming and xing was considered prior to Wang. Notably, Mencius (Mengzi 7B24) states: “The mouth in relation to flavours, the eyes in relation to sights, the ears in relation to notes, the nose in relation to odours, the four limbs in relation to comfort—these are matters of human nature, but they are also fated. Nonetheless, a gentleman does not refer to them as human nature. Benevolence between father and son, righteousness between ruler and minister, propriety between guest and host, wisdom in relation to the worthy, the sage in relation to the Way of Heaven—these are fated, but they also involve human nature. Nonetheless, a gentleman does not refer to them as fated.” Here, Mencius highlights two aspects of human life that do not correspond or are dissimilar, where one must simply be accepted, and the other requires cultivation. Although Wang may have differed in his examples of what falls under the purview of ming and xing, his thought also implies the presence of aspects of life that can simply be accepted, while others require capabilities, effort, or creativity.
I: 285‒95) considers these as exaggerations, and in response provides naturalistic explanations to show that thunder is fire, devoid of any supernatural causes or agents, and it is not an expression of the anger of Heaven.

Thus far, we have explored how Wang viewed endowment in relation to human life and briefly touched on the question of whether he advocated for fatalism. However, the lingering question is how human capabilities fit into this framework. The presupposition here is that in affirming endowment, Wang only showed the areas where humans are helpless, but did not intend to promote radical fatalism. Therefore, I propose the importance of contentment, where humans must learn to live within the boundaries of their endowment and accept the limitations of their lives. Although we may not fully agree with Wang’s interpretation of ming, we can draw corresponding analogies or parallel experiences to make sense of this concept. For instance, there are areas of human existence that we cannot change, such as being born, dying, ageing, and so on. In such cases, we can only surrender to the processes and allow things to unfold. Contentment does not equate to settling for mediocrity. Rather, being contented or accepting these unchangeable areas of life can enable us to be more creative in managing the things we can control.

The issue of whether Wang promoted determinism may also be relevant in relation to the concept of xing, which suggests that human actions are determined or motivated by natural disposition. However, it appears that Wang’s perspective aligns with that of ming, in which he did not promote radical determinism. As he states, “speaking of [natural disposition] one must distinguish good and bad characters; [while] the good ones are so of themselves, the wicked can be instructed and urged on to do good” (LH I: 374; also see LH I: 99). This passage implies that goodness must be the guiding principle for all humans, and those with good natural dispositions can serve as moral exemplars. In contrast, those with bad dispositions can be transformed through instruction, education, or influence from others. In sum, although natural disposition may lead to a sense of determinism, transformation is still possible, although requiring the sincere willingness of humans. A further remark deserves attention here regarding the non-correspondence between xing and ming, where there is no causal relation or guarantee between one’s dispositions or actions and a favourable endowment or status in life. This means that no matter how good one’s disposition is, one should not expect this to reap a favourable endowment, otherwise one may end up feeling miserable. Therefore, humans should strive to do good for its own sake without expecting anything in return, which exemplifies a high moral character.

Inclusive humanism, as Cheng (1998, 215) states, “is a view of the human as a creative process of self-fulfilment of reality, in reality, for reality, and from reality”.
This aligns with the idea that the transformation towards goodness, as discussed earlier, is a manifestation of this creative process of self-fulfilment. While ming and xing are spontaneously generated and rooted in or from reality, humans have the power to transform or make sense of these two aspects of life. Moreover, humans have roles in the transformation of things, which indicates that they are part of the transformation of reality. As Wang puts it, “in spite of spontaneity [ziran] there may be activity for a while in support of it. Ploughing, tilling, weeding, and sowing in Spring are human actions. But as soon as the grain has entered the soil, it begins growing by day and night” (LH I: 97). Despite the primacy of ziran in most processes, human support is important. It is thus important for humans to evaluate if their activities to support such processes are appropriate, which is possible if there is a sufficient understanding of nature. Additionally, the concept of proportional equality is relevant to this context. While humans and other things or creatures are equal in the numerical or ontocosmological sense, humans are superior in some respects. This superiority, however, entails their responsibility which is why human activities must lead to the transformation rather than the destruction of things and reality at large.

Moreover, the embeddedness of ming in the human body implies the possibility of anthroposcopy (guxiang 骨相; see LH I: 304‒12). In other words, if endowment is not discernible in the human body, then there is no basis for the practice of anthroposcopy, a form of divination that proceeds from the inspection or examination of bone structures to arrive at a knowledge of one’s endowment. Physiognomy, a more common form of divination that involves assessing personality and endowment based on bodily features or examining certain body parts, shares some similarities with anthroposcopy. 11 On a related note, it is striking that Wang seems inconsistent in some of his remarks regarding the intelligibility of endowment. In one instance, he states that knowing endowment is an easy process (LH I: 304). But he contradicts this in other places wherein he describes it as a difficult process (LH I: 149, 311). Despite this inconsistency, it is evident that Wang believes in the possibility of knowing one’s endowment.

Given that it is possible, one may question the importance of knowing endowment. There can be several responses, such as to aid in making decisions about whether one still needs to work hard and whether one’s efforts will reap something good in the future, to get rid of future disappointment, and to overcome the fear of anxiety or even excitement. I describe these responses as indolent, lazy, or even cowardly

11 Wang refers to Mencius’s assessment of the goodness of human beings based on eye physiognomy. Wang states: “Mencius judges [humans] by the pupils of their eyes. If the heart be bright, says he, the pupils are clear, if it be dark, the pupils are dim.” (LH I: 385). The complete text is found in Mengzi 4A15.
since the motive behind knowing endowment stems from a reluctance to exert effort or take risks. But for Wang—and here I agree with the claim of Zong-qi Cai (2005, 181)—“to 'know ming' simply means knowing enough to be resigned to whatever life one is born to live”. This means that knowing endowment requires acknowledging that there are things or events that must simply be accepted while also recognizing that there are things or events that can be changed or improved. Endowment shows the aspects of life that we must yield to, but we must likewise understand that there are aspects of life in which we must take active measures. Perhaps gaining knowledge of one’s endowment allows for past events, no matter how painful or miserable, to become meaningful or at least bearable. It enables us to view present events with full understanding and appreciation and to anticipate the future with optimism and acceptance rather than abhorrence or anxiety.

Humility in Divination, Inclusive Humanism, and Modern Science

By humility, I mean the virtue or disposition that expels pride, which may hinder humans from understanding their roles, capabilities, and the universe at large. This understanding of humility is partly inspired by my reading of St. Thomas Aquinas, one of its well-known defenders. In the *Summa Theologiae*, he states that humility, “inasmuch as it expels pride, makes [humans] submissive and ever open to receive the influx of Divine grace”. Although his conception of humility is rooted in theology, I am intrigued by the relevance of Aquinas’s understanding of the role of humility when transposed to a secular or more general context. In this article, I replace “being open to Divine grace” with “being open to understanding that there are entities or forces more superior to humans” and “being open to accepting the equality of humans with other spontaneously generated beings alongside their outstanding status”. Here, I employ the term ontocosmological humility to describe such openness since it pertains to being humble about the very being of humans and their belongingness or situatedness within the world or universe in which they and other creatures reside.

One of Wang’s criticisms of divination pertains to the excessive reliance and trust placed by humans in the practice, causing them to disregard the advice of their

12 *ST*II-II, q.161, a.5, ad 2. This article uses the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. In citing *The Summa Theologiae*, I refer to the numbers of part, question, article, and objection. Hereafter, this source is cited as *ST* followed by the aforementioned details.

13 Here, I follow Andrew Charles Pinsent who affirms the validity of Aquinas’s understanding of humility in a secular context. He (Pinsent 2021, 209) states, “it is proper and good for human persons to relate to other persons as second persons, and the damage to relationships from the species of pride, underline how humility is also valuable in a more general and secular sense".
friends (LH I: 182). Arguably, both divination and listening to friends require humility as they involve seeking guidance from “others” or external sources. In listening to friends, it is impossible to ask for advice if there is no humble admission that one needs it. To engage in the practice of divination, one must humbly recognize that there are entities or forces that are superior to humans, such as God, Heaven, the universe, fate or endowment, chance, and so on, and it is understood that these have some influence, authority, or control over humans. Without such humility and if one is self-assured to the extent of discounting those that are superior, there is no reason to engage in divination. Moreover, being humble can help people to acknowledge that certain things are beyond human control and that relying solely on human will is inadequate.

In order to demonstrate inclusive humanism in Confucianism, Cheng (1998, 222–23) describes the position of humans in the universe based on the ontocosmological worldview expressed in the Xici zhuan (繫辭傳). He states:

… the human being is the most unique and outstanding third in the production of Heaven and Earth. Together with Heaven and Earth the human being forms a ternion, or triad, with the whole universe. The interesting thing about this ternion is that a human is capable of doing what Heaven and Earth do, namely, nourishing life and helping things to grow. But a human is not exactly Heaven or Earth, although he or she possesses the virtues of Heaven and Earth in order to achieve higher orders of value. It is in this sense that the human creations, such as culture and art, should be treasured as products of human creativity. But what humankind creates has to be conducive to the continuation of the natural course of Heaven and Earth, not detrimental to it … As a representative of Heaven-Earth, the human is not to conquer and exploit nature for his own comfort and private enjoyment because he has knowledge. It is rather this comprehensive knowledge that enables the human to care for other life-forms and to appreciate and protect nature.

This passage asserts the outstanding status of humans, which is also affirmed in the accounts of Dong and Wang. Dong’s (2016, 363) concept of tianrenheyi posits this high status, as they can be potentially categorized with Heaven. Wang also elevates humans, claiming that: “in man, the mind of Heaven and Earth reach their highest development” (LHI: 529). Despite their outstanding status, humans maintain a sense of equality with other creatures. This is emphasized in Cheng’s (1998, 215) inclusive humanism, which acknowledges the intrinsic value of all creatures in promoting harmony and unity. Wang’s concept of ziran also implies
equality among all creatures, including humans, who are all subject to the same
generation and degeneration processes (LH I: 528).

The misuse or abuse of the outstanding status of humans and their comprehensive
knowledge can have harmful consequences. As Cheng highlights in the above
passage, humans must utilize their knowledge and capabilities to benefit all life
forms rather than causing destruction. This idea is reminiscent of Paul J. Crutzen
and Eugene F. Stoermer’s (2000, 17) concept of the “Anthropocene”, which em-
phasizes the impact of human activities on the environment. As they use this
concept to describe the current geological epoch, Crutzen and Stoermer (2000,
18) also state that “to develop a world-wide accepted strategy leading to sustaina-
bility of ecosystems against human induced stresses will be one of the great future
tasks of mankind”. While human activities are inevitable, they must be carried
out with responsibility and not at the expense of other elements or creatures in
the universe. Moreover, engaging in irresponsible actions is an act of pride, as
humans tend to neglect other creatures and prioritize their own benefit due to
their outstanding status and comprehensive knowledge. Aquinas’s description of
pride is also analogous to such actions, as he states that “pride [superbia] is so
called because a man thereby aims higher [supra] than he is” (ST II-II, q. 162, a.
1). Irresponsible actions can be considered acts of pride because humans engage
in activities they are not meant to, which is analogous to humans aiming higher
than they are. To put it briefly, humility is an essential virtue or disposition that
humans must possess to refrain from misusing or abusing their outstanding status
and comprehensive knowledge, acknowledge their equality with other creatures,
and act in ways that benefit all creatures.

It is noteworthy that modern science, particularly in the study of the universe, has
an ambivalent stance with regard to humility. On the one hand there is no place
for humility, but only for human intelligence and excellence. This exemplifies ex-
clusive humanism where humans are full of pride and are “striving for domina-
tion, with rationalistic science at its disposal” (Cheng 1998, 213). For instance,
Michio Kaku (2011, 17) states that humans “will make the transition from being
passive observers of the dance of nature, to being the choreographers of nature, to
being masters of nature, and finally to being conservators of nature”. Essentially,
Kaku envisions a world where human intelligence supersedes all other forms of
intelligence and humans have sole responsibility for everything, dominating every
aspect of the universe.

On the other hand, some accounts affirm the place of humility in their discourse.
As Peter Hodgson (1993, 252) argues, “compared with the vastness of space, we
are totally insignificant. It should make us very humble, or perhaps afraid”. This
perspective may be interpreted as a pessimistic or negative interpretation of humility, implying that this virtue or disposition is required because humans are insignificant. With regard to our discussion of inclusive humanism, this perspective seems to disregard the role of humans in the universe and their intrinsic value in fostering harmony or unity with the universe and other creatures. In contrast, Carl Sagan takes a more optimistic perspective (Sagan 1997, 13), stating:

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known.

Rather than focusing on what may be perceived as negatives, such as the tiny size of the world of humans compared to the vastness of the whole universe, Sagan reframes it to empower humans and their relationships with one another. This perspective also presents cosmo-ethics (i.e., the ethics of inclusive humanism), as it illustrates the universe and suggests how humans ought to live. The humbling reality of the place of humans in the universe should inspire kindness and responsibility towards one another. The universe has been kind by providing a home or dwelling space for us, and in a similar way, we should display kindness to each another. It is also the duty of humans to preserve and cherish this home, as Sagan notes, reminding us to act with a sense of responsibility.

While humility is understood as lowliness, with Aquinas (ST II-II, q.161, a.1, ad 2) describing it as “the notion of a praiseworthy self-abasement to the lowest place”, this understanding is not applicable in the context of this article. Here, humility is not a necessary virtue or disposition because humans are lowly or insignificant. Instead, humility is abandoning pride and appreciating the role that people, however small, play in transforming themselves, other creatures, and the universe. Practicing humility also means listening to the universe in order to establish a harmonious relationship with it and all other creatures that inhabit it.

Conclusion

In this article, I offer a new perspective on Wang’s defence of divination, relating it to inclusive humanism. By exploring Wang’s reinterpretation of the concepts of ziran, ming, and xing in his defence of divination, I demonstrate how humans ought to live in the universe. Ziran, for instance, implies ontocosmological equality, which means the equality of things, including the equality of humans and other creatures.
Additionally, the concepts of *ming* and *xing* highlight how humans can transform themselves and play a part in transforming other creatures and the universe.

I take a step further to show how a humanist reading of Wang’s defence of divination can be relevant today by promoting ontocosmological humility. This disposition or virtue can guide humans to acknowledge the intrinsic value of all creatures and their equality with them. It can also guide humans in their role to transform not only themselves but also other creatures and the universe. Human activities are inevitable, but problems have arisen due to their failure to regard other creatures and the universe and instead merely prioritized human benefits. Therefore, it is hoped that humans can act responsibly by rethinking their role or position in the universe and embodying ontocosmological humility.

References


