

# TEACHING WU JINGZI'S *The Scholars*

BY WU JINGZI

TRANSLATORS: YANG HSIEN-YI (YANG XIANYI)  
AND GLADYS YANG

NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1993  
692 PAGES, ISBN 0231081537, PAPERBACK

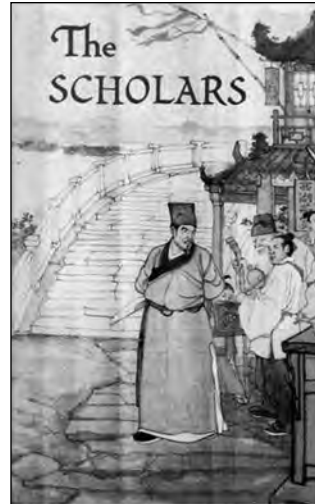
REVIEWED BY IHOR PIDHAINY

It is always pleasant to be able to assign a work that is both iconic and fresh.<sup>1</sup> Wu Jingzi's (1701–54) *The Scholars* is just such a work.<sup>2</sup> It is rightfully considered an important novel in the Chinese tradition, and yet it is not a work that students are familiar with.<sup>3</sup> This novel is ideal to use in either literature or history survey courses for its unique representation of late imperial Chinese culture and society.

*The Scholars* is a sprawling series of vignettes about the adventures of approximately one hundred scholars. These scholars, all men, (only men were allowed to write examinations in imperial China), had passed a series of exams based on the Confucian classics. Having passed these exams, they were uniquely eligible for holding bureaucratic office, and thus specially privileged and quite powerful in society. The difficulties of the exam system were notorious, and the usefulness of this system, particularly in the later imperial period (from the fourteenth century on) was much questioned.<sup>4</sup> Wu used a decidedly sarcastic brush in his description of this sliver of the population, and both the humor and hyperbolic qualities of the text make it a most appealing read.

*The Scholars* is readily taught as a work of social criticism. The scholars of the novel are for the most part all too human. Many of them are pedants, many are scam artists, and others possess much worse traits. Reading the book as a critique of class structure comes across pretty well. One can also approach it as an attack on the world of *gongming fugui* (success, fame, wealth, exalted position), which is the main concern of these scholars. This particular phrase is repeated a couple of times in the opening chapter and can be readily referred to with textual support. In addition, the work looks at the difference between idealistic and pragmatic Confucianism. The most famous example is that of the character Wang Yuhui, who, as an author on ritual and philological texts, urges his recently widowed daughter to commit suicide. And yet, when she has done so, he is despondent by the stupidity of his idealism. Other contemporary social ills, such as concubinage, foot-binding, and the exam system, are also critiqued. The general malaise that Chinese intellectuals of the Qing felt toward traditional culture is well on display.

Our relatively good knowledge of the author and his circle of friends is also an important feature of this work. This contrasts well with authors of earlier works such as the *Water Margin* and *Plum in the Golden Lotus*.<sup>5</sup> Those writers are either unknown and guessed at



by scholars, or semi-legendary, as in the case of Luo Guanzhong and Shi Nai'an. The autobiographical features of the novel highlight the interiority and self-reflection that was also growing apace in literature in the later imperial period. Now, whereas the author of *Plum in the Golden Lotus* is still heavily indebted to the *Water Margin* for his story, Wu merely borrows the framework and occasional motifs from the *Water Margin*. There is in this a more sophisticated approach to authorship and creativity, and very fertile ground for comparative approaches with novels from other traditions, such as European or Japanese.

Moving from the personal to the political, *The Scholars* highlights the implications of writing during the Manchu Qing dynasty, when writing was a potentially dangerous occupation, and writers were careful in light of the stringent Manchu approach to politically incorrect works. Like other well-known writers of the early Qing, such as Pu Songling and Cao Xueqin, Wu did not transmit a published version of the work. Rather, *The Scholars* traveled in manuscript copy until it was first published in 1768–69. The subject matter of the work appears uncontroversial at first glance: a history of officials during the early to mid-Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

However, the novel is historical and forces the reader to confront how to read history. The historical tradition within China and its application to the novel, as well as the use of history as a mirror for the present day, are themes that come readily to mind. The title, *The Scholars*, is a rough approximation of *Rulin waishi* (An unofficial history of the Forest of Confucians). *Rulin* referred to the section of the biographies in official [i.e., state] histories, which recorded the lives of prominent scholars of that dynasty. *Waishi* is used in contrast to *zhengshi* or official histories—i.e., those histories put together privately by independent scholars. By giving his work this title, the author is suggesting a private historian's view of the scholars' world. Indeed, the Qianlong Emperor declared that there were only twenty-four official histories, and that the last of them, the *Mingshi* (*History of the Ming Dynasty*) was completed in 1739.<sup>6</sup> Wu began *The Scholars* in the 1740s, aware of these circumstances. Furthermore, the novel begins with a famous scholar, Wang Mian of the Yuan dynasty, who refuses to serve under the Mongols. As Mongol was often used as code for Manchu, the complexities of racial difference in the Qing dynasty come to the forefront. In addition, Wu wrote romantically of a lost golden age that had long ago disappeared. Nevertheless, Wu's attitude to the Ming dynasty founder, Zhu Yuanzhang, is also ambiguous: he too appears in the opening chapter in a markedly different manner than in the official *Ming History*.

Wu Jingzi was also quite interested in the intricacies of philosophy of the day. Indeed, it has been argued that this novel should be read as structured around *li* or ritual.<sup>7</sup> The climax of the novel is the ritual ceremony held in chapter 37 at Taibo Temple, dedicated to Wu Taibo, a famous hermit of Chinese antiquity (twelfth century BCE).

## ESSAY BOOK REVIEW

Wu Taibo was the centre of cultish worship during the Qing dynasty, and indeed there were a number of visits made by the Qianlong Emperor to his temple.<sup>8</sup> Discussions about ritual can introduce a variety of neo-Confucianism as seen in the works of the minor Confucian scholars Yan Yuan (1635–1704) and Li Gong (1659–1733), who differed greatly from earlier scholars such as Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529).

Finally, *The Scholars* is quite famous because of its use of the vernacular language. In the 1920s and 1930s, when Chinese intellectuals moved to reform the written language from a classical to a vernacular basis, *The Scholars* was heavily promoted as a model to be followed. This particular feature is more difficult to explore in translation, but needs to be addressed in class. In courses with a Chinese language component, this point should be addressed at the outset.

*The Scholars* is best taught in survey courses on Chinese history or Chinese literature. I have found that judicious use of a few selections is most effective. While the book can be assigned in its entirety, students are likely to find it too anecdotal. In my own classes, I have had success using chapters 1 and 55, and chapters 5 and 6.

The opening (1) and closing (55) chapters serve as prologue and epilogue to the novel. They function much as bookends and are independent from the plot. The main figure in chapter 1 is Wang Mian (1287–1359), who is thoroughly idealized by Wu Jingzi. Wang's pursuit of scholarly activities is caused solely by his innate desire for them. He is presented without any interest in fame or gain. He thus serves as the ethical norm by which all other scholars in the book are measured. The officials who inhabit the first chapter are of a dubious nature, whether participating in the Yuan government or merely interested in their own profit. Zhu Yuanzhang's appearance and his treat-

ment of Wang Mian are quite different in nature. Incidental to this are some lovely sketches of the nature of the world—also captured by Wang in his painting, which he takes up as a pursuit. Chapter 55 also presents idealized characters: four common men who take up scholarly pursuits and embody the virtues of true scholars. These men are not without eccentricities and behave in an outlandish manner, so are readily of interest to students. In addition, because the closing chapter is divided into four distinct sections, some insight into the organization of this novel and other traditional novels can be made.

Chapters 5 and 6 are of a different nature. Being part of the novel, they need some contextualization. However, this is quite worth it, as they present a fascinating look at the greed, pettiness, and desires of local officials. The main character, Senior Licentiate Yan, cheats his neighbors, curries favour with higher officials, and manages to escape both the law and many bills that he owes payment on. His younger brother, Yan Dayu, is smitten by cheapness, worrying on his deathbed about the cost of an extra candle-wick burning! The focus of the story, though, is how Yan Dayu's concubine (nee Zhao) takes the place of his wife (nee Wang) as main wife and then, when a widow and needing an heir, manages to best Senior Licentiate Yan in retaining her husband's property. In discussion, it is helpful to spell out some of the elements hidden in the translation: Concubine Zhao becomes a *tianfang* or replacement wife before the first wife has expired. Yan's first wife, Wang, has two brothers, Wang De (Virtue) and Wang Ren (benevolence), who are virtuous and benevolent when given the right amount of money. In reading these chapters, students will gain insight to social and economic aspects of the late imperial period.

*The Scholars* is truly a work worth teaching in courses on the later imperial period of China. Within a large class, it can be a useful illustrative text of the points discussed above. In a smaller, more focused class, it would allow students to explore many of the issues important at the time. ■

## NOTES

1. My teaching of *The Scholars* has been influenced by Richard Lynn and Milena Dolezelova.
2. The only complete translation of the novel is by Gladys Yang and Yang Hsien-yi (Yang Xianyi), *The Scholars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). I have used *pinyin* transliteration in place of the Wade-Giles transliteration used in their translation.
3. For an introduction to the novel, see C. T. Hsia's *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 203–244.
4. For an overview of the examination system, see Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).
5. For questions concerning authorship, see C. T. Hsia, *Ibid.*, and Andrew Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
6. Wei Shang, *Rulin waishi and Cultural Transformation in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 143.
7. Shuen-fu Lin, "Ritual and Narrative Structure in *Ju-lin Wai-shih*" in Andrew Plaks, ed., *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 244–265.
8. Wei Shang, *Ibid.*, 29–53, 233–253.

IHOR PIDHAINY teaches at the University of Toronto in the Departments of History and East Asian Studies. His current research focuses on Chinese travel writing of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

## MUSEUM QUALITY EXHIBITS



**"MY LIFE IS MY MESSAGE"**—40 panels (2' x 4') of photographs with captions on the life of Mahatma Gandhi.

**"INDIA—THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND"**—more than 100 color photographs taken over 40 years by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

**"BEAUTY IN STONE"**—Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic architecture of India, color photographs by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

Also—smaller portable exhibits (mailed via postal service), video cassettes (including biographical documentaries of Gandhi), and other resources available for loan.

Undergraduate-level CORRESPONDENCE COURSE on Gandhi (study materials from the Gujarat Vidyapith University in India founded in 1920).

## THE GANDHI MEMORIAL CENTER

P.O. Box 9515  
Washington, D.C. 20016  
Phone: (301) 229-3871  
Website: [www.gandhimc.org](http://www.gandhimc.org)  
Email: [resources@gandhimc.org](mailto:resources@gandhimc.org)