TEACHING WU JINGZI’S The Scholars

BY WU JINGZI

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It is always pleasant to be able to assign a work that is both iconic and fresh. Wu Jingzi’s (1701–54) The Scholars is just such a work. It is rightfully considered an important novel in the Chinese tradition, and yet it is not a work that students are familiar with. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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).
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.8 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 fucianism and indeed there were a number of visits made by the Qianlong Emperor to his temple.8 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).

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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.
6. Wei Shang, Ruin waishi and Cultural Transformation in Late Imperial China (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 143.