

Abstract

This essay assesses the didactic value of Wu Ching Tzu's The Scholars by comparing its portrayal of society with historical research. It argues that this novel recreates the atmosphere of Ming society, offers a personal experience of different levels of social life, and provides an insight into its problems and changes. It evaluates the impact of Wu's use of satire on its historical meaning.

The contemporary focus on reading as a form of entertainment overshadows the didactic value of historical fiction, where its interplay of literature and history offers an opportunity to relive the spirit of its time. Strictly speaking, novels cannot be conceptualized as a valid historical source as they portray society and culture through a subjective perspective with both fictional characters and settings. Nor can they be dismissed merely as stories, because they encase the social, political and economic conventions of their time. Rather, novels are a synthesis of these two extreme definitions, where they contribute to our historical understanding if we interpret them with scepticism and utilize them to formulate an independent analysis of history. Wu Ching Tzu's The Scholars exemplifies these didactic qualities of novels, as its incisive satire of the literati and the officials not only broadens our understanding of the dynamics of Ming society and government, but also exposes the corruption and incompetence of its ruling class.

Significantly, Wu provides an insight into the class-consciousness of Ming society and its conformism to behavioural standards, particularly in the dialogue between Wang and Bailiff Chai where Wang declines Magistrate Shih's invitation to see Mr

Wei.¹ On the surface there is indeed egalitarianism, as Mr Wei (“*a real scholar*”)² requests Wang (a peasant who cannot afford fuel and rice)³ to visit him, hence prioritising talent over economic and political prowess. However upon deeper analysis Wang and Bailiff Chai’s speech mannerisms typify social commitment to Confucian hierarchy, which emphasised respect for upper classes.⁴ Specifically, Wang’s self-effacing tone in the line: “*I am only a peasant and dare not accept such an invitation,*”⁵ reflects his acceptance of his subservience, and his conformity to the standard of respect expected of his class. Furthermore, Wang’s distinction between the invitation and a “*summons where I am under no compulsion,*”⁶ not only reinforces this sense of hierarchy, but also highlights the reclusive nature of the peasantry’s relationship with the gentry. Similarly, the gentry are also class-conscious and reciprocate this subservience with their perception of treating lower classes equally as a breach of gentleman etiquette.⁷ Bailiff Chai’s patronising question - “*do you mean to say a county magistrate can’t summon a common man?*”⁸ echoes both the gentry’s prejudice and their expectations of peasantry passivity. While this dialogue is fictional, it nevertheless recaptures the sense of Confucian social stratification where customary levels of respect create unassailable class barriers.

¹ Wu C.T. *The Scholars* 3rd ed translated by Yang H.Y & Yang G (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000) pp.4-7

² *ibid* p.4

³ *ibid* p.2

⁴ Waley A. *The Analects*, (Vintage Books, 1938) cited at *School of History Course Materials* p.21 “*Master Yu said; those who in private life behave well towards their parents and elder brothers, in public life seldom show a disposition to resist the authority of their superiors.*”

⁵ Wu C.T. *The Scholars* 3rd ed translated by Yang H.Y & Yang G (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000) p.6

⁶ *ibid* p.7

⁷ Wu C.T. *The Scholars* 3rd ed translated by Yang H.Y & Yang G (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000) p.31

⁸ *ibid* p.7

However, it is important to note that Wu's novel does not accurately portray Ming society, as it deliberately subverts reality in order to expose the inherent problems of the time. This is seen in its satirical picture of Ming society fevered by the prospect of passing the civil service examination and entering the prestige officialdom. Although this examination system ostensibly attempts to counterbalance hereditary supremacy by allowing the "*literati to become a new gentry class*,"⁹ Wu exposes the reality that it "*favours sons of incumbent officials*"¹⁰ and the wealthy. This inequality is validated by Wu's exaggeration of the divergent avenues to officialdom - lower classes fixate their lives upon "*writing paku essays on the Confucian classics*,"¹¹ while upper classes simply exploit their connections and wealth. Wu ridicules the peasantry obsession with grandeur and their obstinate determination to enter officialdom, through the character Chou Chin who devotes his life to passing the examination. Moreover, this mockery is evident in the caricature of Fan Chin's hysterical reaction to news of him passing the provincial examination where he "*claps his hands, lets out a peal of laughter and shouts, Aha! I've passed.*"¹² Conversely, Wu criticises the wealthy for their unorthodox ways of entering officialdom by exposing their exploitation of both their connections and the yamen's unthinking venality in the scene where Pan Number Three guarantees that Chin Tung-Yeh's idiotic son will pass by "*finding a substitute and settling the yamen.*"¹³ However, more absurd is the commercialisation of examination success where "*a pass in Shaohsing is worth a cool thousand taels*,"¹⁴ which undermine the system's intentions of developing a government controlled by the intellectual elite. These contrasting situations alert us to

⁹ Morton W.S *China Its History and Culture* 3rd ed (America: Mc Graw-Hill, Inc. 1995) p.88

¹⁰ *ibid* p.100

¹¹ Wu C.T. *The Scholars* 3rd ed translated by Yang H.Y & Yang G (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000) p.13

¹² *ibid* p.34

¹³ Spence J.D. *The Search For Modern China* 2nd ed (New York: Norton, 1999) p.21

¹⁴ *ibid*

the considerable discrepancy between the aims of the examination system and its reality – the aim of replacing aristocratic hereditary rule with an intelligentsia administration is somewhat subverted by the wealthy exploiting covert avenues to officialdom.

However, Wu presents the incompetence of officials and scholars as the central problem of Ming society, rather than this socio-economic inequality. This ineptitude is partially attributed to their values on self-aggrandizement as opposed to making contributions to society and the government. This is exemplified in Tu's deception as he pretends to be seriously ill in order to avoid imperial service and maintain his idealistic lifestyle of "*going out in the spring and autumn to look at flowers and drink wine.*"¹⁵ However, this governmental amateurism is predominantly attributed to the concentration on academia and art as opposed to political training.¹⁶ Wu reaffirms this by satirizing the literati's frivolous lifestyles where their absorption in arts and literature makes them neglect their political roles, which demand active participation in formulating strategies that improve social welfare and ensure stability. A prime example of this political ineptitude is the scene where Wu parallels the serious situation where bandits jeopardize law and order, with the triviality of the literati's discussion on literature.¹⁷ It is absurd that these "*authorities take no steps to put an end to robbery,*"¹⁸ and instead engage in a petty literary critique of "*In the Gentle Wind from the South.*"¹⁹ The oblivion to this immediate bandit problem is reinforced

¹⁵ Wu C.T. *The Scholars* 3rd ed translated by Yang H.Y & Yang G (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000) p.372

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Wu C.T. *The Scholars* 3rd ed translated by Yang H.Y & Yang G (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000) p.383

¹⁸ *ibid* p.382

¹⁹ *ibid* p.372

in Tu's plan to outlaw concubinage unless a man has no son by the age of forty.²⁰ At the same time, his morally and religiously oriented plan reveals the weakness of the examination system, which produces masters of Confucian morality rather than politics. It is thus expected that the officials who are selected from a class of scholars are also incompetent. Wu makes this obvious by creating a comical picture of officials as the fail to maintain order within their own class - Wan is able to financially benefit from the local gentry and merchants by masquerading as the secretary of the Imperial Patent Office when he is actually a licentiate.²¹ These instances where scholars and officials immerse in the arts provide explanation for their political incompetence and ultimately elucidate the truth in Chih's comment - "*If ministers of State took their duties equally seriously, the whole world would be at peace.*"²²

Perhaps more problematic is the officials' corruption, where values on upholding justice are sacrificed in the name of powerful connections. This is a consequence of regionalism, which makes it virtually impossible to ensure legal consistency across prefecture, sub-prefecture and county jurisdictions.²³ Consequently, a wide discretion is conferred upon "*court officials who apply the li (laws which accommodate changing conditions) rather than the lü (unchanging laws) in order to advance their interests.*"²⁴ This judicial corruption is underscored as the magistrate presiding the allegations against Licentiate Yang for tax embezzlement decides to immediately release him with "*no need to pass a verdict,*"²⁵ in order to avoid offending the

²⁰ *ibid* p.379

²¹ *ibid* p.545

²² *ibid* p.379

²³ Parsons J.B *The Ming Dynasty Bureaucracy* cited at *Chinese Government in Ming Times Seven Studies* 1969 (New York and London: Columbia University Press.) pp.183-185

²⁴ Wu C.T. *The Scholars* 3rd ed translated by Yang H.Y & Yang G (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000) p.103

²⁵ *ibid* p.104

powerful Lou family who “*demand an explanation for the scholar’s arrest.*”²⁶ The magistrate’s unjustified leniency towards this indictable offence is illuminated when this outcome is compared to the harsh punishments imposed on relatively minor offences documented in *Cases from The Hsing-An Hui-Lan*.²⁷ Although this archive of cases is from the Qing period, it nevertheless indicates the level of penal severity in imperial China. For instance, Wang T’ing was sentenced to a “*hundred blows with heavy bamboo and two years penal servitude*”²⁸ for merely announcing plans to establish an office that profits from handling taxation matters and settling civil litigation.²⁹ The disparity between Wang T’ing’s harsh sentence and the dismissal of Licentiate Yang’s charges, clearly show that powerful connections override justice in a judicial system corrupted by self-interested officials.

Although the government’s irresponsiveness to these problems may suggest that Ming society is stagnant, in reality it is gradually changing. It faces an ideological crisis where changing economic and social conditions challenge Confucianism. Wu pictures this changing society by paralleling stories on people continuing the Confucian culture, with stories of society’s departure from tradition, thus showing how literary techniques recreate the climate of its context and hence broaden our historical understanding. On one hand, Ming culture is anchored in Confucianism because it upholds the ritualistic traditions and virtues advocated in the Five Classics as displayed in the scenes where scholars make sacrifices to an ancient sage at the

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Jones W. *The Great Qing Code* cited at School of History Course materials (University of New South Wales 2003) p.101

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ *ibid*

Temple of Tai Po³⁰ in order to “*secure the blessings and protection of spirits,*”³¹ Wang Mien and Fan Chin show their filial piety by adhering to the three-year mourning period, and a widow from Huichow fulfils her “*moral duty not to have two husbands*”³² by “*following her husband to the grave.*”³³ Moreover, society maintains the Confucian patriarchy where fathers have authority over their daughters in all spheres of life. This is reflected in Mr Lu’s decision to marry his daughter to Chu Hsien Fu without discussing the matter with his daughter³⁴ – his admiration for Chu Hsien Fu’s genius, and their matching horoscopes are sufficient to ensure a successful and everlasting marriage.

On the other hand, there is an equally strong sense that Confucianism cannot be entirely conserved, as society adapts to the new economic policy where Ming government “*is willing to permit merchants a relatively free hand in buying, moving and selling items controlled by state monopoly.*”³⁵ This perpetuates both the merchants’ accumulation of prestige and authority³⁶ and the disintegration of Confucian hierarchy, which despises merchants as a parasitic class that does not contribute to society.³⁷ Their growing power is suggested by Miss Shen’s comment - “*Those rich and powerful salt merchants live in such luxury that scholars often cower*

³⁰ Wu C.T. *The Scholars* 3rd ed translated by Yang H.Y & Yang G (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000) p.407.

³¹ Theodore de Bary. W et al *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (Columbia University Press, 1960) cited at School of History Course Materials 2003 p.3

³² Ebry P *Women, Marriage, and the Family* cited at School of History Course Materials 2003 p.78

³³ Wu C.T. *The Scholars* 3rd ed translated by Yang H.Y & Yang G (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000) p.529

³⁴ *ibid* p.117

³⁵ Brook T. *The Confusions of Pleasure Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (University of California Press, 1951) p.66

³⁶ Brook T. *The Confusions of Pleasure Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (University of California Press, 1951) p.66

³⁷ <http://www.openhistory.org/jhdp/intro/node35.html> accessed on 12/10/03

*before them.*³⁸ Their emerging equality with the gentry is symbolized by Fang the salt merchant's grand procession of enshrining virtuous women that "*filled half the street, with Magistrate Wang as well as the Peng family escorting the shrine,*"³⁹ where he enshrines his mother on par with the gentry's aunts. Together, these situations recreate the sense of confusion where hierarchal restructure shake the foundations of this society that is determined to conserve Confucian ideologies.

By weaving together individual stories, *The Scholars* etches the life and problems of Ming society across its literary topography. Its pages of historical fiction allow us to personally experience Ming culture and the social life in different classes. In this sense, fiction can only be valued as a source of clarifying and expanding of historical knowledge. Yet its didactic scope extends beyond this - if we value Wu's literary techniques as a part of the historical content, the text offers another dimension to the factualism of academic works. Its satirical techniques not only expose the political incompetence and corruption of literati-officials, but also capture the social climate where there is a growing discontent with Ming governance. Ultimately, the lasting impression of *The Scholars* gives rise to the conclusion that fiction contributes to our historical understanding with its ability to take us on a realistic journey to the past.

³⁸ *ibid* p.427

³⁹ Wu C.T. *The Scholars* 3rd ed translated by Yang H.Y & Yang G (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000) p.525