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The SCHOLARS

WU CHING-TZU



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FOREWORD

*Wu Tsu-hsiang*¹

The long and glorious tradition of classical realist literature in China was carried forward in the middle of the eighteenth century by two outstanding novelists — Tsao Hsueh-chin, author of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, and Wu Ching-tzu, author of *The Scholars*.

Although Wu Ching-tzu was born some twenty years earlier than Tsao Hsueh-chin, *The Scholars* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber* were written during the same period. Chinese feudalism, the development of which had long been retarded, was in a state of decline. Several decades had passed since the invasion of the Manchus, who by military might and political measures had gradually consolidated their rule. The peasant revolts and risings against the Manchus of the early years of the Ching Dynasty had been suppressed. The people led a wretched life, and the contradictions in society were sharply reflected in the conflict within the ruling class itself. Ruling cliques, growing ever more corrupt and spiritually bankrupt, were fighting among themselves.

Both Tsao Hsueh-chin and Wu Ching-tzu were born into ruling class families which had come down in the world. With deep insight into the rottenness and hopelessness of their class, each made use of what he himself had seen and experienced to paint a great canvas. Tsao took marriage as his central theme, to reflect the vices of the aristocratic ruling class which was nearly played out. Wu wrote of officials and ex-

¹ Professor of Chinese literature in Peking University.

aminations, to expose the decadence of the literati and the government. Although the two men looked at life from different angles and described different facets of society, the nature of the problems they raised was the same: they both exposed the iniquitous feudal system and feudal rule of their time.

The Dream of the Red Chamber and *The Scholars* have been widely read for nearly two hundred years. Directly and indirectly, these books have educated the Chinese people and contributed to the development of democratic ideas. Because of the high quality of its satire, *The Scholars* has always made a deep impression on its readers. Thus the preface written during the Tung Chih period (1862-1874) by Hsin Yuan Tui Shih declares: "... You are warned not to read this novel; for once you have read it, you will feel you are meeting its characters all the time in real life."

In his *Outline History of Chinese Fiction*, Lu Hsun states that *The Scholars* is the first Chinese novel which is a social satire, and that in this respect it has never been surpassed.

II

If we want to understand *The Scholars*, there are certain important facts about Wu Ching-tzu's life and thought which we must take into consideration.

Wu Ching-tzu was born in 1701 into a distinguished family in Chuanchiao County in the province of Anhwei, on the north bank of the Yangtse River. Many of his clan had held high government posts during the time of his grandfather and great-grandfather; thus for the fifty years at the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Ching Dynasty his family had prospered. Wu's grandfather died early, however, after a less successful official career than his brothers and cousins. And Wu's father had been a county instructor for a few years only when he offended his superiors and was dismissed from office, dying a year later. Wu Ching-tzu lost his mother when he was thirteen and his father when he was twenty-three. His father's experience disillusioned him with officialdom; and, coming from a distinguished family, he became a spendthrift

who despised wealth. In a few years he ran through his property. His servants and dependants deserted him, his wealthy relatives looked down on him, and snobbish neighbours cold-shouldered him. Finding it impossible to stay in his native place, he moved at the age of thirty-three to Nanking. Very soon he was quite destitute and, until his death in Yangchow in 1754, had to live on his writing and the assistance of friends. Often he had to sell old books to buy food, and sometimes he went hungry for several days on end.

During the gradual decline of his family and his own rapid impoverishment, he suffered a great deal and gained a wealth of experience which strengthened his sense of justice and made him a sensitive, cool-headed observer of reality. This helped him to understand the nature of the class to which he belonged, and made him sympathize with the common people. He saw through the decadence and shamelessness of scholars under the Manchu despotism, and perceived the viciousness of the government and the degeneracy of society. He was, therefore, increasingly drawn to the humble, unsuccessful people with whom he came into contact. In short, Wu Ching-tzu's personal experience was the source of his sober realism.

Though Wu's father and grandfather were unsuccessful in their official careers, they both retained their faith in the moral precepts of Confucius and Mencius. And Wu was deeply influenced by them, especially by his father. His contempt for officialdom, wealth and rank, and his emphasis on principle, were rooted in his family upbringing. Of course, in that society and under the influence of the literati of the time, it was impossible for any man to be completely indifferent to officialdom. After passing the prefectural examination at twenty, Wu Ching-tzu sat for other examinations. When he was thirty-six, he went to the provincial capital to sit for a special examination for which the governor of Anhwei had recommended him. Later, however, when recommended to go to the capital for the palace examination, he declined. For after seeing the mortification of friends who had failed in the palace examination he had finally made up his mind to take no more examinations himself. Without this bitter experience over so many years, Wu could never have felt such disgust for officialdom or

the *paku* essays,¹ and examination system by which these were attained. Nor could he have seen so clearly through ordinary men and affairs to unmask the bane of the society and political life of his time, which he pointed out with such realism and satirical humour.

The writer who used the pen-name Hsien Tsai Lao Jen stated in his preface to *The Scholars*: "The main theme of this book is the attainment of wealth and position through the official examinations. Some scholars become abject flatterers through their craving for wealth and position. Some take advantage of their wealth and position to lord it over others. Some, who pretend to despise wealth and position and pose as superiors, are held up to ridicule. There are others, however, who turn their backs on worldly success, and these are the positive characters in the novel."

These apt generalizations give us the main theme of *The Scholars* in a nutshell. The choice of this theme was the outcome of deep thinking and genuine feeling on the author's part; and all the characters and incidents in the novel are based on keen observation and personal experience.

III

Wu Ching-tzu lived during the reigns of three emperors—Kang Hsi, Yung Cheng and Chien Lung. He was born in the forty-first year of Kang Hsi, when the Manchus had completed their conquest of China proper and were suppressing the minority peoples in the frontier regions. There was still considerable patriotic feeling, however, in China. Therefore, while consolidating their rule, the Manchus intensified their control of men's minds. Kang Hsi, one of the most learned and able monarchs in Chinese history, attempted to introduce thought control by buying the allegiance of some intellectuals

¹ A type of essay specially designed for the civil service examinations. The form, number of words, and language were strictly prescribed, and isolated quotations from the Confucian classics were chosen as subjects. It was given the name *paku* (eight paragraphs) because each essay must have no more and no less than eight paragraphs.

and harshly repressing others. In the twelfth year of his reign he invited certain outstanding scholars to court; but those of any integrity, who were loyal to the Ming Dynasty, did not rise to this bait. Five years later, he introduced a new system for promoting learned men, and ordered the ministers in the capital as well as the provincial officials to recommend scholars and compel them to go to the capital for an examination. To deal with the rank-and-file intellectuals, he promoted the civil service examinations, to pass which men had to be able to write *paku* essays. Thus to master this form of composition, many men frittered away their lives in futile study. And, finally, Kang Hsi set up the Bureau for the Compilation of the Ming Dynasty History, which was joined even by scholars who had hitherto refused to work for the Manchus, for they feared lest otherwise Ming Dynasty history might be distorted.

With very few exceptions, all intellectuals fell into Kang Hsi's trap. So the *paku* essay began to reign supreme, and this was a dark age for genuine scholarship. Chang Hsueh-cheng, a historian of the reign of Chien Lung, declared that, from the beginning of Yung Cheng's reign to the middle of the reign of Chien Lung, *paku* essays were so much the vogue that the literati actually thought the study of the classics unorthodox and writing poems and essays in the classical style frivolous. Unless a man could write *paku* essays, he was not considered a scholar. This completely confirms the descriptions in this novel.

At the same time that scholars were being bribed or deliberately kept ignorant, the rulers carried out a policy of cruel suppression. The massacre following the trial involving the *Ming Dynasty History* in the third year of Kang Hsi was only one of many. Because this history had been based on facts and expressed certain anti-Manchu sentiments, the emperor ordered the execution in the most brutal manner of the writer's entire clan, the scholars who wrote the prefaces, the editors, printers, even the book-sellers and purchasers, as well as the local officials and all their kinsmen. The writer, Chuang Ting-lung, had died; but his body was exhumed and cut into pieces.

Later, during Wu Ching-tzu's lifetime, there were some even more cruel massacres, involving greater numbers. Emperor Yung Cheng, who usurped the throne, relied even more upon terror. Almost every year there was a great trial of intellectuals, which ended in the butchery of many innocent people. Since Yung Cheng reigned from the time when Wu Ching-tzu was twenty-three till he was thirty-five, the impression made on Wu by these events must have been very strong. He probably began writing *The Scholars* during the first years of Chien Lung's reign, when he was nearing forty, and completed it before he was fifty. By this time there was less terrorism, but the threat of it still remained. Under these circumstances, considerable courage was needed to write an exposure of the government and society of the time which would very likely offend the censors. Great skill was also required to cloak the author's indignation and patriotism, in order that he might not find himself in trouble.

For the most part, Wu Ching-tzu used real people and real incidents as material for this book. Tu Shao-ching is a portrait of the author himself, while Chuang Shao-kuang is modelled on his friend Chen Ting-cho. We know that Tu's refusal to accept official recommendation and the sacrifice at Tai Po's Temple in Nanking are founded on facts. However, the author interspersed these experiences of his with many imaginary episodes, and disguised the political and social reality of his time as happenings which took place in the Ming Dynasty. He had to do this in order to avoid offending the government. Moreover, this enabled him to write more trenchantly, and make the best use of the satire in which he excelled.

In the first chapter of *The Scholars*, where Wu Ching-tzu wants to make clear the meaning of the whole book, he chooses a historical figure, Wang Mien, selects from Wang Mien's life all that is relevant to his own conception of an ideal man, and portrays him as a model for later scholars. Wu Ching-tzu makes it clear that this chapter points the moral of the novel.

Wang Mien's type of scholar had always been admired in ancient China during the golden age of which Wu dreamed, when the literati came between the ruling class and the peo-

ple. Administering the country for the ruling class, scholars had a special position. According to tradition, it was their duty to do good deeds for the emperor, to watch over the people's interests and, to a certain extent, to listen to the voice of the people. In this way the feudal system could be securely maintained. Thus whenever the rulers flouted the wishes of the people by acts of tyranny, some scholar of integrity would make the gesture of going to live as a hermit. Hence Wang Mien, as depicted by Wu Ching-tzu, epitomizes the traditional integrity of the scholars of ancient China; for by refusing to accept an official post he expresses his protest against oppressive rule.

By using Wang Mien to point the moral of the book, Wu Ching-tzu presents his main theme clearly and provides a criterion by which all the other characters may be judged.

IV

But, while exposing the political and social evils under Manchu rule, the main attack in this novel is directed against the literati. The central theme of *The Scholars* is the attitude of the literati towards the examination system which led to position and wealth. In feudal China scholars were a very important social group, and often exerted a great influence on the people. The Manchu invaders were numerically inferior and their cultural level was low, while the Chinese had a long history and a great civilization. Hence the Manchu rulers from the first paid special attention to the control of the literati. Taking over the infamous examination system of the Ming Dynasty which tested scholars by means of the *paku* essay, they used this as the chief means to win over and lead scholars astray, restrict learning and suppress freedom of thought. This is why the novel makes such a powerful attack on the *paku* essay and satirizes the scholars who try so desperately to become officials.

In the first few chapters of *The Scholars*, Wu Ching-tzu opens fire on the examination system itself. Chou Chin and Fan Chin lead miserable lives before passing the examinations, but once they pass they feel as if transported to heaven.

After Chou Chin passes, Mei Chiu, who formerly laughed at him, brazenly claims to be his pupil. His calligraphy is carefully taken down from the wall to be kept as a great treasure, while the villagers who despised him and dismissed him from his post as teacher now build a shrine for him, and treat him as if he were a god.

Fan Chin, again, when we first meet him is on the verge of starvation. When his family has gone without food for two days, he has to take a laying hen to the market to sell. But then, in the twinkling of an eye, he gets land, houses, servants, fine porcelain and cups and chopsticks inlaid with silver. By passing the examinations, scholars who have been trampled underfoot suddenly become officials who can lord it over everybody else. Inevitably, they make desperate attempts to pass.

There was no fixed standard of scholarship, however. Chou Chin, who sits for each prefectural examination, does not pass until he is an old man. Then he has a sudden run of luck and soars to great heights. Fan Chin, too, does not pass until his hair is grey. Then he is examined by Chou Chin, who sympathizes with him on account of his age, and reads his paper three times. At first he thinks Fan Chin's essay very poor. "Whatever is the fellow driving at?" he wonders. "I see now why he never passed." But after reading it three times, he decides that it is "the most wonderful essay in the world — every word a pearl." And so, before even looking at the other papers, he marks Fan Chin first on the list.

This was the kind of farce the examination system was, and the absurd way in which rank and riches were won. Yet it was precisely this absurd farce that sent scholars off their heads, making them lose all sense of right and wrong, and abandon all their ideals and convictions.

The thirteenth chapter describes Ma Chun-shang's opinion of the examination system. To him, it has been the duty of scholars since ancient times to become officials, and it does not matter how a man achieves this end. "Even Confucius," he says, "if he were alive today, would be studying essays and preparing for the examinations instead of saying 'Make few false statements and do little you may regret.' Why? Be-

cause that kind of talk would get him nowhere: nobody would give him an official position."

Stupidity and ignorance are characteristic of these men set on official careers. Chang Ching-chai and Fan Chin—both scholars—talk all sorts of nonsense about Liu Chi¹ to Magistrate Tang, but have no knowledge at all of recent history. And Fan Chin, who is an official, has never even heard of the famous Sung Dynasty poet Su Tung-po.

Dishonesty is another common fault. Thus Senior Licentiate Yen seizes a neighbour's pig, cheats people out of money, steals a widow's property, and pretends his walnut wafers are medicine worth hundreds of taels of silver.

The two brothers Wang Jen and Wang Teh are outstanding examples of the hypocrisy of the literati. After each has been bribed with a hundred taels, they begin to mouth lofty sentiments. Striking his fist on the table, Wang Jen declares: "The great thing about us scholars is our adherence to principles. If we were writing a composition to speak for Confucius, we should take exactly the line we are taking now...."

The scholars' ranks were filled with such brazen hypocrites. Greed made them boast, cheat and fawn on their superiors. Yet instead of thinking such conduct reprehensible, they had a high opinion of themselves.

Since most of the officials of that time were the stupid and shameless "scholars" produced by this examination system, it is no wonder that the government was corrupt. Thus we see Magistrate Tang of Kaoyao County acting quite irresponsibly. When the Moslems ask for permission to sell beef, he takes the advice of another fool, and has an old man killed. He causes a great uproar, yet in the end is allowed to punish the Moslems in order to preserve his face.

Again, when Prefect Wang goes to his post at Nanchang, his one thought is: "Three years of good government—one hundred thousand taels of silver." Because he practises ruthless extortion, he becomes known as the ablest officer in Kiangsi and is very quickly promoted; while more humane officers like the magistrates of Wenchow and Antung are cen-

¹ An early Ming Dynasty statesman.