



The  
SCHOLARS

WU CHING-TZU



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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS PEKING

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

儒林外史:英文/(清)吴敬梓著.

—北京:外文出版社,1995

ISBN 7-119-01213-4

I 儒... II. 吴... III. 古典小说:笔记小说—中国  
—古代—英文 IV. 1242.1

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(95)第08460号

外文出版社网址: <a href="http://www.flp.com.cn">http://www.flp.com.cn</a> 外文出版社电子信箱: <a href="mailto:info@flp.com.cn">info@flp.com.cn</a> <a href="mailto:sales@flp.com.cn">sales@flp.com.cn</a>
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儒林外史

吴敬梓 著

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©外文出版社

外文出版社出版

(中国北京百万庄大街24号)

邮政编码 100037

北京外文印刷厂印刷

中国国际图书贸易总公司发行

(中国北京车公庄西路35号)

北京邮政信箱第399号 邮政编码 100044

1957年(28开)第1版

2000年第3版第5次印刷

(英)

ISBN 7-119-01213-4 / I • 215 (外)

04800

10-E-262S

## LIST OF PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

- Chang Chin-chai, *landlord in Fan Chin's district*  
Chang Chun-min (Iron-armed Chang), *swordsman and charlatan*  
Chao Hsueh-chai, *physician and poet*  
Chen Mu-nan (Fourth Mr. Chen), *relative of Duke Hsu's family*  
Chi Wei-hsiao, *student, works in the customs*  
Chih Heng-shan, *teacher, Tu Shao-ching's friend*  
Ching Lan-chiang, *pseudo-scholar, hat-shop manager*  
Chou Chin, *poor teacher, later commissioner of education and chief examiner*  
Chu Chin-yu, *son of the prefect of Nanchang, Fan Chin's secretary*  
Chu Hsien-fu, *Chu Chin-yu's son*  
Chuko Tien-shen, *scholar*  
Chuan Wu-yung, *pedant, protégé of the Lou brothers*  
Chuang Shao-kuang, *well-known Nanking scholar*  
Concubine Chao, *Yen Ta-yu's concubine*  
Fan Chin, *poor scholar, later examiner*  
Feng Ming-chi (Fourth Brother Feng), *champion of the unfortunate*  
Hsiang Ting, *magistrate of Antung, later intendant of Tingchang Circuit*  
Hsiao Chin-hsuan, *scholar*  
Hsiao Hao-hsuan, *crossbow adept from Szechuan*  
Hsiao Yun-hsien, *his son, military officer*  
Hsun Mei, *Chou Chin's pupil, later palace graduate and inspector of the Salt Gabelle*  
Huan-cheng, *servant in the Lou family*  
Hung Kan-hsien, *swindler*  
Ko Lai-kuan, *actor of women's roles*  
Kuang Chao-jen, *poor scholar, later senior licentiate*  
Kuo Tieh-pi, *seal-cutter*  
Kuo Tieh-shan (Filial Kuo), *son of Wang Hui*  
Lai Hsia-shih, *Taoist priest*  
Lou Chan, *fourth son of Minister Lou, student of the Imperial College*  
Lou Feng, *third son of Minister Lou, provincial graduate*

Ma Chun-shang, *licentiate, editor of paku essays*  
 Mei Chiu, *licentiate*  
 Miss Lu, *daughter of Compiler Lu, wife of Chu Hsien-fu*  
 Mrs. Wang, *Pao Ting-hsi's wife*  
 Mu Nai, *highwayman, later soldier and sergeant*  
 Niu Pu-lang, *pedlar, later passes himself off as Niu Pu-yi*  
 Niu Pu-yi, *Fan Chin's secretary, poet*  
 Niu Yu-fu, *salt merchant's protégé*  
 Pan Number Three, *corrupt functionary in Hangchow*  
 Pao Ting-hsi, *adopted son of Pao Wen-ching, son of Ni Shuang-feng*  
 Pao Wen-ching, *actor*  
 Pin-niang, *courtesan*  
 Shen Big Foot, *go-between, wife of Shen Tien-fu*  
 Shen Chiung-chih, *a scholar's daughter who refuses to be a salt merchant's concubine*  
 Shuang-hung, *Miss Lu's maid*  
 Tang Chou, *brigade general*  
 Tang Shih, *his son, licentiate*  
 Tang Yu, *his brother, licentiate*  
 Tsang Liao-chai, *licentiate*  
 Tu Shao-ching, *brilliant scholar who squanders his fortune*  
 Tu Shen-ching, *his cousin*  
 Wan, *secretary of the Imperial Patent Office*  
 Wan Hsueh-chai, *salt merchant*  
 Wang Hui, *Hsun Mei's classmate, later prefect of Nanchang, rebel*  
 Wang Jen, *Yen Ta-yu's brother-in-law*  
 Wang Teh, *licentiate, Wang Jen's brother*  
 Wang Yi-an, *pander*  
 Wang Yu-huei, *licentiate*  
 Wei Ssu-hsuan (Fourth Mr. Wei), *Tu Shao-ching's friend*  
 Whiskers Wang, *Tu Shao-ching's steward*  
 Wu Shu, *student of the Imperial College, Nanking*  
 Yang Chih-chung, *senior licentiate, protégé of the Lou brothers*  
 Yen Chih-chung, *senior licentiate, local bully*  
 Yen Ta-yu, *college scholar, Yen Chih-chung's brother*  
 Yoo Hua-hsuan, *Yu Yu-ta's cousin, scholar of Wubo County*  
 Yu Yu-chung, *licentiate, brother of Yu Yu-ta*  
 Yu Yu-ta, *senior licentiate, tutor of Hueichi Prefectural College*  
 Yu Yu-teh, *doctor of the Imperial College, Nanking*

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# CHAPTER 1

In which an introductory  
story of a good scholar  
points the moral of the  
book

*Men in their lives  
Go on different ways;  
Generals, statesmen,  
Saints and even immortals  
Begin as ordinary people.  
Dynasties rise and fall,  
Mornings change to evenings;  
Winds from the river  
Bring down old trees  
From a former reign;  
And fame, riches, rank  
May vanish without a trace.  
Then aspire not for these,  
Wasting your days;  
But drink and be merry,  
For who knows  
Where the waters carry the blossom  
Cast over them?*

**T**HE idea expressed in this poem is the commonplace one that in human life riches, rank, success and fame are external things. Men will risk their lives in the search for them; yet

once they have them within their grasp, the taste is no better than chewed tallow. But from ancient times till now, how many have accepted this?

However, at the end of the Yuan Dynasty\* a really remarkable man was born. His name was Wang Mien, and he lived in a village in Chuchi County in Chekiang. When he was seven his father died, but his mother took in sewing so that he could study at the village school. Soon three years had passed and Wang Mien was ten. His mother called him to her and said, "Son, it's not that I want to stand in your way. But since your father died and left me a widow, I have had nothing coming in. Times are hard, and fuel and rice are expensive. Our old clothes and our few sticks of furniture have been pawned or sold. We have nothing to live on but what I make by my sewing. How can I pay for your schooling? There's nothing for it but to set you to work looking after our neighbour's buffalo. You'll be making a little money every month, and you'll get your meals there too. You start tomorrow."

"Yes, mother," said Wang Mien. "I find sitting in school boring anyway. I'd rather look after buffaloes. If I want to study, I can take a few books along to read." So that very night the matter was decided.

The next morning his mother took him to the Chin family next door. Old Chin gave them some breakfast, and when they had finished he led out a water buffalo and made it over to Wang Mien.

"Two bow shots from my gate is the lake," he said, pointing outside. "And by the lake is a belt of green where all the buffaloes of the village browse. There are a few dozen big willows there too, so that it is quiet, shady and cool; and if the buffalo is thirsty it can drink at the water's edge. You can play there, son; but don't wander off. I shall see that you get rice and vegetables twice a day; and each morning I shall give you a few coppers to buy a snack to eat while you're out. Only you must work well. I hope you'll find this satisfactory."

Wang Mien's mother thanked Old Chin and turned to go home. Her son saw her to the gate, and there she straightened his clothes for him.

"Mind now, don't give them any reason to find fault with you," she charged him. "Go out early and come back at dusk. I don't want to have to worry about you."

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\* 1279-1368.

Wang Mien nodded assent. Then, with tears in her eyes, she left him.

From this time onwards, Wang Mien looked after Old Chin's buffalo; and every evening he went home to sleep. Whenever the Chin family gave him salted fish or meat, he would wrap it up in a lotus leaf and take it to his mother. He also saved the coppers he was given each day to buy a snack with, and every month or so would seize an opportunity to go to the village school to buy some old books from the book-vendor making his rounds. Every day, when he had tethered the buffalo, he would sit down beneath the willows and read.

So three or four years quickly passed. Wang Mien studied and began to see things clearly. One sultry day in early summer, tired after leading the buffalo to graze, he sat down on the grass. Suddenly dense clouds gathered, and there was a heavy shower of rain. Then the black storm clouds fringed with fleecy white drifted apart, and the sun shone through, bathing the whole lake in crimson light. The hills by the lake were blue, violet and emerald. The trees, freshly washed by the rain, were a lovelier green than ever. Crystal drops were dripping from a dozen lotus buds in the lake, while beads of water rolled about the leaves.

As Wang Mien watched, he thought, "The ancients said, 'In a beautiful scene a man feels he is part of a picture.' How true! What a pity there is no painter here to paint these sprays of lotus. That would be good." Then he reflected, "There's nothing a man can't learn. Why shouldn't I paint them myself?"

Just then, he saw in the distance a fellow carrying two hampers over his shoulder and a bottle of wine in his hand. Hanging from one hamper was a rug. The man spread the rug under the willows, and opened the hampers. Behind him came three men in scholars' square caps, all some forty to fifty years old. Two were dressed in dark grey, and the third in a blue linen gown. Fanning themselves with white paper fans, they advanced slowly. The one in blue was fat. When he reached the willows he asked one of the men in grey, one with a long beard, to take the seat of honour, and another, a thin one, to sit on the rug opposite. He himself was evidently the host, for he sat in the lowest place and poured the wine.

They began eating. After a while, the fat man said, "Mr. Wei has come back. His new house is even bigger than the one in Bell Tower Street in the capital. The price was two thousand taels of silver, but, because the purchaser was so distinguished, the owner allowed him several dozen taels discount for the sake

of the credit he would get from this transaction. On the tenth of last month Mr. Wei moved in. The prefect and the county magistrate called to congratulate him, and stayed there feasting until nearly midnight. There is nobody who does not respect him."

"The magistrate used to be Mr. Wei's pupil,"\* said the thin man. "It was only right for him to pay his respects."

"My son-in-law's father is an old pupil of Mr. Wei's, too," said the fat man. "He has a post as magistrate now in Honan Province. The day before yesterday my son-in-law came to visit me, bringing two catties of dried venison — that's it on this dish. When he goes back, he's going to ask his father to write a letter of introduction so that I can call on Mr. Wei. Then, if Mr. Wei condescends to come to the village to return the visit, the villagers won't dare to turn their donkeys and pigs loose to eat the grain in our fields any more."

"Mr. Wei is a real scholar," said the thin man.

"Recently, when he left the capital," said the man with the beard, "I heard the emperor himself escorted him out of the city, taking his hand and walking nearly twenty steps with him. It was only after Mr. Wei had repeatedly bowed and entreated him to go no further that the emperor got into his sedan-chair and returned to the city. Judging by this, Mr. Wei will probably soon become a great official."

The three men talked on and on; but Wang Mien saw that it was growing late, and led the buffalo back.

After that, Wang Mien no longer spent his savings on books, but asked someone to buy paints for him in the city, and learnt to paint lotus flowers. At first he did not do too well, but after three months he succeeded in capturing the very essence and shades of colour of the lotus. Though he painted on paper, his flowers seemed to be growing in the water, or as if freshly plucked from the lake and placed on a scroll. When the villagers saw how well he painted, some even bought his pictures. And when Wang Mien had money he bought good things for his mother. One person told another, until the whole of Chuchi County knew that he was a famous flower painter, and people vied with each other in their eagerness to buy. By the time he was eighteen he had stopped working for Old Chin, and spent every day doing some

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\* A candidate who passed a civil service examination considered himself the "pupil" of the examiner who had passed him, and called the examiner his "patron."

painting or reading old poems and essays. By degrees he no longer had to worry about his livelihood, and his mother was happy.

Wang Mien had genius. While still in his teens, he mastered the whole field of astronomy, geography, the classics and history. He was, however, eccentric. He did not look for an official post, and did not even have any friends. All day he studied behind closed doors; and when he saw in an edition of the poems of Chu Yuan\* a picture of the poet's costume, he made himself a very high hat and a loose flowing gown. In the fresh and flowering spring he would take his mother out in a buffalo cart, and, dressed in his high hat and loose gown, flourishing the whip and singing songs, would drive all over the countryside and around the lake. Small groups of village children would tag after him, laughing; but he did not mind them. Only his neighbour, Old Chin, realized how remarkable he was; for Old Chin was an intelligent man, though a peasant, and he had seen Wang Mien grow up. He respected and loved Wang Mien, and often asked him to his thatched cottage to talk with him.

One day Wang Mien was sitting in Old Chin's cottage when a man wearing a bailiff's cap and blue cloth gown came in. Old Chin welcomed him, and after an exchange of courtesies they sat down. This newcomer's name was Chai. He was a county runner and also a bailiff, but since Old Chin's son was his godchild he often came to the village to visit their family. Old Chin hastily called his son to make tea, kill a chicken and cook some meat to entertain the bailiff, and asked Wang Mien to accompany them.

When Bailiff Chai heard Wang Mien's name, he asked, "Is this Mr. Wang the flower painter?"

"Yes," said Old Chin. "How did you get to know of him?"

"Is there anyone in the county who doesn't know him?" retorted the bailiff. "The other day the county magistrate commissioned me to get twenty-four paintings of flowers to send to a superior. Knowing Mr. Wang's great reputation, I've come straight here; and now I'm lucky enough to meet Mr. Wang himself." Then he turned to Wang Mien and said: "I must trouble you to do some paintings. In two weeks I shall come to fetch them, bringing the payment from Magistrate Shih."

Old Chin pressed Wang Mien to consent and, to please the old man, he agreed.

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\* China's earliest great poet (B.C. 340-278).

He went home and took infinite pains to paint twenty-four pictures of flowers, each with a poem appended. Bailiff Chai reported his meeting with Wang Mien to the magistrate, who gave him twenty-four taels of silver. Of this sum Chai appropriated half, giving twelve taels only to Wang Mien. He took the flower album away with him, and then the magistrate sent it with some other presents to Mr. Wei.

When Mr. Wei accepted the gifts, the album alone attracted his attention. He looked at the paintings again and again, liking them so much that he could scarcely take his eyes off them. The next day he invited Magistrate Shih to a feast to thank him. They exchanged greetings, and drank several cups of wine.

"Yesterday I received your gift of a flower album," said Mr. Wei. "Is it the work of an old master or of a contemporary?"

Not daring to conceal the truth, the magistrate told him, "It was painted by a peasant in one of the villages in my county. His name is Wang Mien, and he is quite young. I believe he has just learnt to paint; but his work is unworthy of your distinguished notice."

Mr. Wei sighed and said, "I left home so long ago that, though my native place has produced so great a man, I did not know it. I am ashamed. He shows not only remarkable skill but exceptional insight, and in future his fame and rank will at least equal ours. I wonder if you would invite him to pay me a visit?"

"What could be simpler?" replied Magistrate Shih. "When I leave I shall send a man to invite him. He will be only too pleased to come."

When Magistrate Shih had taken his leave of Mr. Wei, he returned to his yamen and ordered Bailiff Chai to take an invitation card couched in most respectful terms to Wang Mien. Chai hurried down to the village to Old Chin's house, and sent for Wang Mien to step over. Then he told him what his business was.

Wang Mien smiled and said, "I must trouble you to inform the magistrate that Wang Mien is only a peasant and dare not accept such an invitation."

The bailiff's face fell. "When the magistrate invites, who dare refuse?" he demanded. "Especially as it was I who did you this favour! If I hadn't recommended you, how would His Honour know you could paint? You ought by rights to be rewarding me! Instead, after coming all this way, I don't see so much as a cup of tea, and you fob me off with excuses. And why won't you go, pray? Do you mean to say a county magistrate



can't summon a common man? What am I to say to the magistrate when I get back?"

"It's not that, sir," said Wang Mien. "If I receive a summons from the magistrate, how dare I refuse? But you have brought an invitation, which means I am under no compulsion. I don't want to go. His Honour must excuse me."

"That doesn't make sense!" exclaimed the bailiff. "Served with a summons, you go. Asked by invitation, you don't. You simply don't know what's good for you!"

"Mr. Wang," put in Old Chin, "if the magistrate sends an invitation, he must mean well. So why not go? The proverb says, 'Magistrates can ruin families.' Why ask for trouble?"

"The bailiff doesn't understand, uncle," said Wang Mien, "but haven't you heard me tell the stories of the two ancient sages who refused to see their rulers? No, I'm not going."

"You are making it very difficult for me," said the bailiff. "What can I say to the magistrate when I go back?"

"In fact, it is difficult for you both," said Old Chin. "Mr. Wang doesn't want to go. But if he doesn't go, that'll be very embarrassing for Bailiff Chai. Now I have a plan. When you go back to the yamen, bailiff, don't say that Mr. Wang refuses the invitation, but just that he is ill and can't go. He will go in a few days when he is better."

"If he were ill," objected the bailiff, "I should have to get a signed statement to that effect from the neighbours."

They argued for some time. Then Old Chin prepared supper for the bailiff, and while he was eating told Wang Mien secretly to ask his mother for a little silver as messenger's fee. Only then did Chai consent to go back.

When Magistrate Shih heard the bailiff's report, he thought, "How can the fellow be ill? It's all the fault of this rascal Chai. He goes down to the villages like a donkey in a lion's hide, and he must have scared this painter fellow out of his wits. Wang Mien has never seen an official before in his life. He's afraid to come. But my patron charged me personally to get this man, and if I fail to produce him, Mr. Wei will think me incompetent. I had better go to the village myself to call on him. When he sees what an honour I'm doing him, he'll realize nobody wants to make trouble for him and won't be afraid to see me. Then I'll take him to call on my patron, and my patron will appreciate the smart way I've handled it."

Then, however, it occurred to him that his subordinates might laugh at the idea of a county magistrate calling on a mere peasant.