The Scholar and the State

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The eighteenth-century novel The Scholars (Rulin waishi) has posed a hermeneutic challenge to generations of scholars and critics. Despite their admiration for its stylistic and narrative innovations, the readers often feel perplexed by its seeming lack of thematic consistency. Traditionally the work was considered a satirical attack on social institutions, particularly the civil service examinations. Yet, while the examination system is a main topic in the first half of the work, it seems to fade into the background in the later chapters. Even in that early part, the narrative involves many other things apart from the examinations. Furthermore, the attitude toward the examinations reflected in the novel is nuanced, as some of the high-minded characters suffer no qualms about participating in the examinations. While it is fair to say that the novel presents a voice of dissent with regard to the examination system, the examinations are not the overarching issue throughout the entirety of the novel.

As some Qing commentators suggested, the assemblage of the scholars in a ceremony in honor of the ancient sage Tai Bo, the main episode in chapter 37, represents the climax of the novel. Taking that view as the point of departure, Shuen-fu Lin argues in a seminal article that the novelist Wu Jingzi (1701–1754) “has effectively used the element of *li* (ritual) as the central integrative principle in his novel,” central “not only to the structure of the novel but also to the moral vision of the author as well.”
More recently, Stephen J. Roddy and Shang Wei have treated Confucian ritualism as the focal point in their respective studies of *The Scholars.* Given the eighteenth-century intellectual setting that led to a surge of Confucian ritualism and Wu Jingzi’s ties to the Yan Yuan–Li Gong school, the thematic and structural significance of ritualism in *The Scholars* is indisputable, yet the treatment of ritual performance in the novel is by no means consistent. If the Tai Bo ceremony represents the culmination of the effort to revive the ritualized Confucian way of living, that effort, as made clear in the later chapters, ends only in futility. “Why,” as Stephen Roddy wrestles with the question, “does the novel articulate a vision of literati self-renewal through ritual, only to document its failure in subsequent events?” Roddy’s own answer to that question is a broadened notion of *li* that encompasses both ritual and ritual propriety: while the idealist scholars claim to be heirs to the tradition of ritualism, they themselves fail the test of ritual propriety, which contributes to the general decline of literati mores. To Shang Wei, that contradiction in the novel reflects one in the novelist himself: while he recommends ritualized life as a remedy for the social ills that he diagnoses, he is fully aware of the limitations and inadequacies of that remedy. The novel, as a result, “demonstrates a dynamic process of critical inquiry and self-questioning that resists any definite conclusion.” These are powerful arguments; yet, if ritual is the central issue in *The Scholars,* it is not immediately clear how it coexists with some of the other major issues in the novel, including examination essay writing and literary inquisition, in a coherent narrative structure.

This chapter considers the examinations and poetic writing, although two seemingly separate topics in *The Scholars,* as related components of a continuous textual culture, which the imperial state manipulates with the lure of fame and rank on one hand and the terror of literary inquisition on the other. In this light, the performance of the Tai Bo ceremony and the reorientation in the later chapters to the practice of *li yue bing nong* (ritual, music, military training, and farming) represent the literati’s endeavors to break out of the capsule of a textual culture into the world of praxis and to switch from serving *tianzi* (the ruler) to serving *tianxia* (society and civilization). While the novel envisions a rugged and tortuous path for that quest, it concludes on an optimistic note with the four “extraordinary figures” (*qiren*), harbingers of a new generation of intellectuals who are able to make vocational decisions independently, out of the
textual culture. With a tapestry of stories about different types of scholars, *The Scholars* presents a reflection on the identity and social roles of the literati that is more meaningful than one can find in any earlier works of vernacular fiction.

**THE LITERATI AND THE YONGZHENG REIGN**

As Wu Jingzi started writing the novel soon after his relocation from Quanjiao to Nanjing in 1733, a couple of years before the end of the Yongzheng reign, what happened during the Yongzheng years is most relevant to our discussion. During Emperor Kangxi’s long and successful reign (1662–1722), the Qing government solidified state power by putting down all the political and military resistances and rebellions. In the meantime, the Manchu conquerors anointed themselves the new standard-bearers of the Cheng-Zhu school of learning. In Kangxi’s lifetime, as mentioned earlier, some of the top Confucian scholars already venerated him as Zhu Xi’s spiritual heir. With its firm commitment to the neo-Confucian doctrines, the Qing government successfully diluted much of the anti-Manchu nationalist sentiments among the Han literati. However, the state’s usurpation of the leadership role in the *daotong* tradition caused considerable dismay and anxiety among the intellectual elite.

In 1722, Yongzheng inherited from his father his dual status, serving as both the head of the secular state and the spiritual leader of the Cheng-Zhu school of learning. The new emperor wasted no time in exercising his authority. In 1725, a scholar-official named Qian Mingshi (1660–1730) was accused of fawning on the disgraced general Nian Gengyao (d. 1726) with panegyric poems. The punishment that Yongzheng meted out for Qian, bizarre as it might appear, was profoundly meaningful. Having removed Qian from office, Yongzheng humiliated him with a tablet that carried the imperial inscription “Criminal against Confucianism” (*mingjiao zuiren*), which the emperor made Qian hang at the main entrance of his residence. Furthermore, Yongzheng ordered each of the officials in the capital with an examination degree to compose a poem to castigate Qian. He decreed that everybody submit the poems to him for censorship before he had the selected poems delivered to Qian, who in turn was to sponsor the publication of the collection financially. Most interesting was Yongzheng’s explanation of this penalty: “Since Qian Mingshi offended Confucianism
by fawning on a villain with his writing, we on our part will also use writing in lieu of the law of the state” (yi wenci wei guofa).\(^\text{13}\) In another edict, the emperor proclaimed that “we wanted all officials to know that, for a sinner against Confucianism, it would be more painful to live in shame than to die by execution.”\(^\text{14}\) Apparently, by calling Qian a “criminal against Confucianism,” Yongzheng meted out the punishment not in the name of the imperial court but in his self-assumed capacity as the supreme arbiter within Confucianism itself.

Even more demonstrative of the political situation in the early eighteenth century was Yongzheng’s handling of the Zeng Jing case. Inspired by the ideas of the Ming loyalist Lü Liuliang (1629–83), Zeng Jing, a licentiate from Hunan, denounced what he called Yongzheng’s several crimes, including usurpation of the throne, and attempted to instigate Yue Zhongqi, governor-general of Sichuan and Shaanxi, to rebel against the Manchu court. After Zeng was arrested and forced to write his statement of repentance, Yongzheng had the statement, along with his edicts on the case and the record of the interrogations, published in a volume titled *Record of Being Awakened from Befuddlement by the Cardinal Principles* (Dayi juemi lu). The emperor then distributed copies of the book to all scholars empire-wide for mandatory reading, and used Zeng, whose life he decided to spare (until Zeng was executed by Yongzheng’s son and successor, Emperor Qianlong), as a living example of scholarly revolt subjugated. Apart from the anti-Manchu ethnic sentiment that Zeng Jing had inherited from Lü Liuliang, this case reflects the clash between the throne and literati who were disgruntled with the imperial appropriation of the moral primacy of the daotong. In his seditious tract titled *Record of Learning the New* (Zhixin lu), Zeng defiantly challenged the legitimacy of imperial rulers, who, according to him, lacked moral credentials for sitting on the throne:

> The imperial throne should belong to masters in our Confucian tradition, not to heroes in the mundane world [shilu shang yingxiong]. Most of those on the throne knew nothing of scholarly learning, and were simply heroes in the mundane world. Some of them were even wily and crafty fellows, like those who were commonly called scoundrels [guanggun]. Speaking of legitimacy, the throne of the Spring and Autumn period should have gone to Confucius, and that of the Warring States period to Mencius. After the
Qin, those like the Cheng brothers and Master Zhu should have become emperors, and Master Lü should have been emperor in the late Ming. However, the throne was always seized by despots [haoqiang]. Masters in our Confucian tradition are best qualified to be emperors. What did those heroes in the mundane world know about being emperors?  

To this, Emperor Yongzheng responded angrily:

The reason Confucius and Mencius became great sages was that they elucidated the ethical relations, rectified people’s minds, and illuminated the great principles for thousands of generations. How could Confucius or Mencius have wanted to become an emperor? Confucius said, “One should fully observe the rules of propriety in serving one’s prince” [shijun jinli], and “Ministers should serve their prince with faithfulness” [chen shijun yi zhong]. He also said, “The prince is prince, and the minister is minister; the father is father, and the son is son” [jun jun, chen chen, fu fu, zi zi]. In the chapter “Xiangdang” [of Lunyu] you see Confucius being extremely reverent and cautious in front of the prince and ancestors. Mencius said, “I hope to be a minister and fulfill a minister’s obligations” [yu wei chen, jin chen dao]; and he also said, “No man from the Qi respects the King as much as I do” [Qi ren mo ru wo jing wang zhe]. That Confucius and Mencius were in positions to practice the dao was precisely because they dutifully observed the rules for subjects. How could they, as virtuous but untitled scholars [weibu rusheng], have wanted to become emperors?

This exchange illustrates the rivalry and contention between the daotong and the state power throughout much of China’s imperial history. As the ones to carry on the tradition of the daotong, the Confucians had considered themselves holders of the moral primacy overriding even the political authority of the secular rulers, as expressed in the dictum dao zun yu shi (dao is a higher authority than political power). That was the reason that Zi Si rebuffed the summons from Duke Miao of the Lu (Lu Miao Gong). Similarly, Marquis Wen of the Wei (Wei Wen Hou) (r. 445–396 BCE) willingly conceded the moral superiority of the scholar Duan Ganmu when he said: “Duan Ganmu is glorious for his virtue and I am for my power; Duan Ganmu is rich in righteousness and I am in wealth. Power is not as revered as virtue, and wealth not as exalted as righteousness.”
In Qing China, however, the literati were in no position to expect similar respect, as the dao learning had become largely a vehicle for consolidating the state power. Zeng Jing was thus not simply an individual rebel but an audacious spokesman for the mostly muted educated gentry longing to regain the lost status of the daotong. By saying that Confucian masters were best qualified to be emperors, Zeng advocated the convertibility of moral authority into political authority. In reality, however, the conversion always went in the opposite direction. Under Yongzheng’s intimidation, Zeng quickly gave in. In his statement of repentance, he maintained that the ancient sage-kings, Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, and Wu, became rulers because they were exemplary men of virtue and learning. Then he hastened to add that “His Majesty on the throne today . . . is a sage who is also thoroughly conversant in scholarly learning” and that “the virtues of the emperors of the current dynasty were not different from those of Yao, Shun, Yu, and Tang.” In the end, the exponent of the primacy of daotong was brought to his knees by the throne that was not only the supreme representative of political sovereignty but had become the ultimate moral and intellectual arbiter as well.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WANG MIAN STORY

Viewed against the political setting of Wu Jingzi’s time, especially the balance of power between the daotong and the zhengtong, the significance of the Wang Mian story in the opening chapter of The Scholars becomes considerably clearer. The chapter starts with a piece of ci, which the commentator of the Qixingtang edition (1874) calls the “essential point of the whole book” (quanshu zhunao). In the middle of the ci there are these lines:

Rank and fame, riches and privileges
May vanish without a trace.
Then aspire not for these,
Wasting your days.

The Chinese original for “Rank and fame, riches and privileges” is gong-ming fugui, which the commentator in an early version of the work, the Woxian Caotang edition (1803), considers the “general rubric” (da zhu-
nao) of the novel that the author “wrote about in myriads of ways.” Yet the novel obviously does not treat gongming (rank and fame) and fugui (riches and privilege) equally. It is gongming that many of the scholars in the novel seek, for they know only too well that once they attain “rank and fame,” “riches and privileges” will follow as a matter of course. In the case of those few lofty-minded scholars, it is their imperviousness to gongming, which Timothy Wong terms Confucian eremitism, that separates them from the others. The ultimate distributer of gongming was of course the imperial power. Apart from a limited number of cases where gongming was decided by hereditary statuses such as those of bondservants and Manchu nobilities, the Qing imperial state allocated rank and fame primarily through the examinations as a way to win the support and cooperation from the literati.

Wang Mian’s indifference toward rank and fame sets the tone for the entire novel, or “points to the moral of the book” (gaikuo quanwen) as the heading of the chapter states (RLWS 1; Scholars 3). As modern scholars have repeatedly made clear, the novel’s account of Wang Mian’s life and career is significantly different from a number of widely known biographies of the late Yuan scholar-artist. This idealized eremite in the novel is, therefore, Wu Jingzi’s invention. The Qing commentator Zhang Wenhu calls Wang Mian “the forefather of all the mingshi [scholars with no official appointments] in the whole book”; this is not because of his “vast erudition,” but because of his unswerving refusal to serve in officialdom. When the county magistrate sends for Wang Mian on behalf of the bigwig Wei Su, who has taken a liking to Wang’s paintings, the brief dialogue between Wang and the bailiff succinctly sums up the dynamic between the literati and political power. When the bailiff insists that an invitation from the magistrate is just as compulsory and binding as a summons, Wang replies: “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 honor must excuse me” (RLWS 7; Scholars 9). This brief episode is strongly reminiscent of a passage in Mencius. When Wan Zhang asks Mencius why a commoner who is “well-informed” and “good and wise” should refuse to answer the summons by a feudal lord, the master answers: “If it is for the reason that he is well-informed, even the Emperor does not summon his teacher, let alone a feudal lord. If it is for the reason that he is a good and wise man, then I have never heard of
summoning such a man when one wishes to see him.” 30 By rejecting the invitation from the imperious official, as Wang Mian intimates later to his neighbor Old Qin, he is emulating the ancient sages of Duan Ganmu and Xie Liu, who resorted to extreme measures to avoid unwanted visitation from feudal lords. 31

Years later, Zhu Yuanzhang, the prince of Wu and future founding emperor of the Ming dynasty, comes to Wang Mian’s door. He appears to show some sincere appreciation of Wang Mian’s learning and talent, as he claims to “have come specially to pay [his] respects” instead of issuing a summons. When the ruler solicits Wang Mian’s counsel on the strategies for pacifying Zhejiang, Wang’s native province, the scholar advises him to “use goodness and justice to win the people” (yi renyi fu ren), a typical Confucian line on governance that meets the prince’s approving reception (RLWS 14; Scholars 15). The episode may appear to be another variation of the recurrent scene in vernacular Chinese fiction of a ruler’s enlistment for the service of a man of talent. Yet, the ostensible depiction of Zhu Yuanzhang as a respectful and appreciative recruiter of talents may well be ironical in light of Zhu’s historical maltreatment of his civil officials, which must have been common knowledge in Wu Jingzi’s time. In particular, the reader could easily associate Wang Mian with his two contemporary fellow Zhejiang natives, Liu Ji (1311–75) and Song Lian (1310–81), both leading scholars of the early Ming whose careers as Zhu Yuanzhang’s top advisers ended unhappily. 32 Thus, after his rather good-natured interview with the ruler, Wang Mian’s eventual rejection of the official appointment from Zhu Yuanzhang, now Emperor Hongwu, by no means comes as a surprise to the reader. By the time the imperial envoy arrives at his village with much fanfare, Wang Mian has already left home to hide at Kuaiji Mountain. Whether or not this incident is true of the historical Wang Mian is debatable, as the narrator coyly suggests at the end of the chapter, but it is certainly consistent with the idealized eremite that the novel creates. 33

Yet, if the Wang Mian story “points to the moral of the book” as proclaimed in the chapter heading, in what ways is it pertinent to the portrayal of all kinds of scholars in the rest of the novel? The answer lies in the beliefs and values that the scholar-artist stands for. While he does not completely shun government affairs—after all, he does offer counseling to Prince Wu from a Confucian perspective—he scorns those who are
haughty and arrogant in the positions of power and despises those who are covetous for status and fame. For him, the Confucian ideal of *rushi*, or participation in social affairs, does not necessitate office holding. In his case, because of his mother’s deathbed exhortation that he should not become an official, his practice of eremitism, despite its apparent tint of Daoism, becomes his way to fulfill the utmost Confucian principle of filial piety. When Wang Mian learns from the official bulletin about the rules of the civil service examinations, he reacts by expressing his concern that the system may put the educated elite in a moral jeopardy: “Once future candidates know there is such a path to fame and glory, they will disdain genuine scholarship and correct behavior” (*RLWS* 15; *Scholars* 16–17). As Wang Mian sees it, the official recruitment by the imperial state, if associated with fame and prestige, has an erosive effect on the moral integrity of the intellectual elite.

Wang Mian loves to read and has attained remarkable erudition, but he is portrayed in the novel primarily as an artist, much more devoted to painting than textual learning. He is deeply concerned that the examinations are based exclusively on texts and textual production. For him, indulgence in textual knowledge and compositional virtuosity may be detrimental to “genuine scholarship and correct behavior.” And that is the reason for his outcry: “These rules are not good” (*RLWS* 15; *Scholars* 16). In his own case, having an artistic pursuit and a professional commitment away from the world of texts enables him to earn a living without relying on the emolument of office. His vocational choice guarantees an economic autonomy for him, which in turn strengthens his moral stance in resisting the temptations of rank and fame that accompany an official appointment.

Related to Wang Mian’s aversion for officialdom is his view of his position as a literatus in the social structure. Unlike earlier reclusive scholars such as the third-century “Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove” (*zhu-lin qixian*), especially Ruan Ji (210–263) and Ji Kang (224–263), who were forced out of the center of power, Wang Mian voluntary stays away from office and is content with his eremitic life. He is, as a modern scholar has suggested, more like Yan Ziling of the early Eastern Han (25–220), who declined an offer of official position from his former schoolmate Liu Xiu, now Emperor Guangwu (r. 25–56).^34^ Yet Wang Mian, even more so than Yan Ziling, finds life in the lower social stratum perfectly congenial. While he snubs the dignitary Wei Su and the country magistrate, he thoroughly
The Sullivan enjoys the friendship with his neighbor Old Qin, an elderly farmer whose buffalos he attends during his youth. Indeed, one may take the buffalos as a symbol for Wang Mian’s rustic but idyllic village life that is disturbed by the intrusion of Prince Wu’s horses, which are associated with hegemonic political power. Near the end of the chapter, Wang Mian and Old Qin set a small table on the threshing ground and sit down to drink amid the serenity of the early evening. It is obviously a scene of simple and crude life; Wang Mian, however, feels himself fortunate to be in a position where he can take pity on the educated elite of the future: “Scholars of the later generations will have hard times ahead” (*RLWS* 16; *Scholars* 17, translation modified).

The Wang Mian story thus raises a number of important questions for the literati: If rank and fame become the goal for passing the examinations, what are the moral repercussions? While Confucianism upholds the principle of social participation, would not the examination system, supposedly the apparatus for selecting public servants, actually estrange the scholars from public life by burying them under stacks of texts? Does servitude to the imperial power mean the same thing as serving the nation and society? In other words, should office-holding, in the context of spread literacy and the evolving relationship between the literati and political authorities, still be considered the ultimate vocational goal for the educated elite? These were crucial and burning questions particularly pertinent in Wu Jingzi’s time, when the intellectual climate was under the influence of the early Qing reinvigoration of Confucianism spearheaded by Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi, and Wang Fuzhi (1619–92) as well as the so-called Learning of Substance represented by Yan Yuan and Li Gong. The Wang Mian story thus serves as a point of departure for the novelistic approach to these questions in the main body of the novel.

**The Moral Erosion of Gongming**

When Wang Mian cries out, “scholars of the later generation will have hard times ahead,” he expresses his concern not only for those who fail to reach gongming but also those who succeed in attaining it. What his mother says—“I’m afraid becoming an official is not something that would bring glory to your forefathers. The officials I have seen have all come to a bad end”—turns out to be not only an allusion to the past but
also a prophecy for the future (RLWS 12; Scholars 14, translation modified). Starting with Zhou Jin and Fan Jin, the novel presents a series of moral casualties of gongming. After repeated failures Zhou Jin eventually has a successful run in the examinations, but not before he makes an ugly scene at the examination hall that draws for him a financial sponsorship from a group of merchants, whom the old village school teacher obsequiously addresses as “my foster-parents” (RLWS 33; Scholars 34). In the more amplified story of Fan Jin, the report of his long-awaited juren degree immediately turns the perennial examination failure mad, and the newfound wealth that follows his success costs his mother first her wit and then her life. In each case, the culprit seems to be a fit of emotions, or an “attack by some pestilent elements” (zhong’e) (RLWS 32; Scholars 32, translation modified). That may be true, but the source of those “pestilent elements” is precisely their many years’ obsession with gongming, as the Qing critic Zhang Wenhu suggested.36

In the young scholar Kuang Chaoren, one sees even more clearly a downward moral spiral. After making his debut in the novel as an innocent lad of exemplary filial piety, Kuang enters a gradual but continual process of moral degeneration once he begins his pursuit of gongming. His father’s deathbed admonition—“Fame and fortune are external things after all; it’s goodness [dexing] that really counts”—clearly echoes that of Wang Mian’s mother, but Kuang, unlike Wang, turns a deaf ear to the parental instruction, which completely vitiates his seemingly dutiful mourning over his father’s death afterward (RLWS 210; Scholars 221).37 As Kuang embraces rank and fame wholeheartedly and turns his back on virtue and integrity—the complete opposite of his father’s exhortation—the advice from his friend Ma Chunshang that gongming is the surest way to “reflect credit on your family” and show “the greatest piety” is rendered scathingly ironical.

Behind the vanity and ambitions of Kuang Chaoren and many other characters in The Scholars is a sense of servitorship to the imperial power, the ultimate dispenser of rank and fame. For them, the path for pursuing gongming is also a pilgrimage to the imperial court and the emperor himself, in both literal and figurative senses. For that reason, they swagger about in plumes borrowed from the state power and regularly use the assumed affiliation with the political authorities to cover their moral deficiencies. Kuang Chaoren, after being selected to enter the Imperial
The Scholars

The Scholars

Academy and then passing the qualifying examination for tutors, returns to his native province to get the testimonial from the local authorities. The young man at the threshold of officialdom now brags about his propinquity to the imperial house: “Scholars like myself who reach officialdom through proper channels are imperial tutors whose pupils are the sons of nobles” (RLWS 244; Scholars 259). Refusing to visit a former friend and benefactor in prison, the tutor, who has just committed the crime of bigamy, attempts to cloak his ingratitude and heartlessness with the bravura rhetoric of serving the throne and the state: “It’s a pity he is in this fix! I would have gone to the gaol to see him, but my position has changed. As a servant of the throne I have to abide by the law; and to call on him in such a place would show no respect for the law” (RLWS 245; Scholars 260).

The same is true of Senior Licentiate Yan (Yan Gongsheng). After his younger brother’s death, Yan comes home from the provincial examinations with a plan to seize his brother’s property. To justify his failure to bid farewell to his departing brother, the older Yan calls his participation in the examinations his attendance to state business: “As the proverb says, ‘Public business comes before private affairs. The state comes before the family.’ Our examinations are a great affair of state, and since we were busy on state business [wei chaoting banshi], even if we had to neglect our own relatives we need feel no compunction” (RLWS 77; Scholars 77). Saying so, Yan gilds his personal ambitions and greed with the luster of moral and political correctness. Thus, even before he can secure an official appointment, his participation in the examinations has already won him significant moral and political capital. That in turn feeds the local bully’s arrogance and self-importance when he denounces his commoner neighbors who have brought up a lawsuit against him: “How dare these common people take such liberties with gentlemen?” (RLWS 78; Scholars 78).

Ma Chunshang: Moral Sustenance from the Imperial Power

Many of the mingshi in the novel, scholars who are ostensibly indifferent to officialdom, are equally under the spell of political power. Just like those who are obsessed with an examination degree, they know all too well that lasting fame and prestige can be founded only on an alliance with political authorities. The amateur poet Zhao Xuezhai is hailed as a celebrity
because his poems attract high-ranking officials, whose visits to his residence augment his personal fame. The ruffian Niu Pulang wants to learn how to compose poems, because he knows that “a man who can write poems doesn’t have to pass the examinations in order to make friends with great officials” (*RLWS* 253; *Scholars* 268). He steals the identity of the poet Niu Buyi, and when Dong Ying, a metropolitan examination candidate, pays him a visit, he uses the arrival of the “high official” at his door to impress his in-laws with whom he lives. In contrast to Wang Mian’s genuine disinterest in office holding, the pretended detachment from political power is merely another means to angle fame and prestige. As a Western scholar has put it, “the more loudly the *mingshi* insist on their detachment, the more they reveal their resemblance to bureaucrats.” 38 This line from Du Shengqing, himself a *mingshi*, summarizes their affectations most succinctly: “It is such a vulgar way of showing refinement” (*ya de zhexue su*) (*RLWS* 346; *Scholars* 370). Indeed, the schizophrenia in Du’s attitude toward women—he marries a seventeen-year-old concubine while vowing his misogyny by citing Emperor Hongwu: “If not for the fact that I was born of a woman, I would kill all the women in the world”—characterizes equally well the attitude of the *mingshi* toward state power and officiladom (*RLWS* 352–53; *Scholars* 377).

For these scholars, the imperial power is the supreme authority not only politically but also morally, indeed with its political and moral sides reinforcing and fortifying each other. That is the reason that they all scramble, in one way or another, to forge some kind of connection to the imperial court. An interesting but slightly different case is Ma Chunshang, a pedantic but honest compiler of pamphlets of sample eight-legged essays. Sauntering along the bank of the West Lake (Xihu) in Hangzhou and dazzled by both the natural beauty and the tempting sights of the market, Ma comes to a pavilion, where he unexpectedly sees on the wall an inscription by Emperor Renzong (r. 1023–63) of the Song dynasty: “Ma Chunshang gave a start when he saw this, and hastily straightened his cap, adjusted his sapphire-blue gown, and took from his boot a fan, which he carried as the tablet courtiers hold in the presence of the emperor. Then, very reverently he faced the wall, advanced in the manner prescribed by court etiquette, and bowed five times” (*RLWS* 180; *Scholars* 188).

As a professional compiler of anthologies of exemplary examination essays, Ma Chunshang may be obsessed with the authority of the
The Scholars

throne, the ultimate judge on the quality of all examination writings. But the meaning of this encounter goes beyond that. When the scholar feels his moral frailty in front of the varicolored temptations, the sight of the imperial inscription becomes for him a timely warning, or, in a modern Chinese scholar’s words, “a head-on blow and a shout” (dangtou banghe) that remind him of the importance of his “intellectual responsibility” and “moral decency.” The scholar, after a moment of mental drifting, finds a moral anchor in the tablet. Leaving the pavilion, Ma returns to the market, jostling his way through women dressed seductively in silk and brocade. This time, however, “the women paid no attention to him, nor he to them” (RLWS 181; Scholars 189). All of a sudden, he becomes immune from all the temptations “as if he were thickly armored.”

Obviously Ma Chunshang is a different type of scholar from Kuang Chaoren, Senior Licentiate Yan, or Niu Pulang. Instead of deceptively parading a connection to the political authorities for ulterior purposes as the others do, Ma may be sincere in showing his reverence for the inscription, an icon of imperial augustness. Yet he shares with the others the same belief in their complete moral as well as political dependence on the imperial authority. Particularly interesting is Ma’s meticulous imitation of the court etiquette in bowing to the tablet in all seriousness, and the use of the fan from his boot as a substitute for huban—a small tablet an official held before his breast when received in audience by the emperor—generates a comical effect. It serves as a lampoon of Ma’s undying ambition for a bureaucratic career and his almost intuitive submission to imperial power. Yet, as Ma Chunshang is actually several hundred years removed from Emperor Renzong’s time, the temporal distance bestows a transcendent nature on this episode. The novel depicts Ma Chunshang as a figure of somewhat middling moral and social standing, and to that extent he may be seen as an average and representative scholar. One may therefore argue that Ma’s encounter with Renzong’s inscription is a reification of the state-literati relationship, when the imperial state had secured its position as the master in the daotong tradition.

SERVING TIANZI OR SERVING TIANXIA?

The dao in Chinese culture, as Yu Yingshi has reminded us, originated in the ancient practice of ritual and music. “It was fundamentally a cul-
tural tradition of managing the social order. From the very beginning, Chinese intellectuals took it upon themselves to attend to Caesar’s affairs. That explains their intense sense of social responsibility, which was best expressed in Fan Zhongyan’s (989–1052) celebrated motto: “Be the first one under heaven to feel concerned and the last one under heaven to enjoy happiness” (Xian tianxia zhi you er you, hou tianxia zhi le er le). While the intellectuals were expected to be active in participating in social affairs, particularly in administrative roles, their sense of responsibility based on the Confucian ideal was supposed to go to “all people under heaven,” or tianxia, rather than the sovereign himself, who was also known as tianzi, or the Son of Heaven. Idealistically, a literatus’s service in officialdom was merely a means for reaching the ultimate goal of ping tianxia, bringing peace and prosperity to all under heaven.

Mencius made clear the difference between serving the ruler and serving the empire: “There are men whose purpose is to serve a prince. They will try to please whatever prince they are serving. There are men whose aim is to bring peace to the country and the people [sheji]. They attain gratification through bringing this about.” Confronting their contemporary reality of the lopsided balance of power between the zhengtong and the daotong, many scholars in the late imperial times reaffirmed that Mencian ideal. According to Lü Kun (1536–1618), what a scholar-official was supposed to serve ultimately was not the imperial power (shi) but the moral principle (li): “Between heaven and earth li and shi are the highest authorities. However, li is the authority over all other authorities [zun zhi zun]. If li is upheld in the court, the empire will not be completely dominated by shi. Even if it is, li will still extend to many generations to come. What is called shi is the power of the throne, and li is the power of the sages. Without li the power of the throne can sometimes go astray.”

During the early Qing, when the topic of political sovereignty became extremely sensitive under Manchu rule, Gu Yanwu’s attempt to differentiate guo, the state, from tianxia, society or civilization, became particularly significant:

What is the difference between loss of the state [wang guo] and loss of civilization [wang tianxia]? Here is the answer: Having the name of the dynasty changed is called loss of the state, and having beasts prey on humans and having people eat each other is called loss of civilization.
Therefore, one should know how to defend the civilization before knowing how to defend the state. Defending the state is what the sovereign, the ministers, and the noblemen have on their minds, while defending the civilization is the obligation of the common people.\textsuperscript{46}

Gu’s differentiation between \textit{guo} and \textit{tianxia} is akin to Huang Zongxi’s distinction between \textit{si} and \textit{gong}. In his \textit{Ming yi dai fang lu}, Huang questioned the legitimacy of the political sovereignty that made the ruler’s “private and personal interest” (\textit{da si}) appear as the “common interest of all people under heaven” (\textit{tianxia zhi gong}). The ruler, as Huang argued, was supposed to be the one to spend his lifetime managing the business for all the people. Therefore, “\textit{Tianxia} should be considered principal and the ruler only subsidiary” (\textit{tianxia wei zhu jun wei ke}), as had been the case in the ancient time of the sage-kings. In Huang’s own time, however, it turned the other way around as “the ruler came to be considered principal and \textit{tianxia} only subsidiary” (\textit{yi jun wei zhu tianxia wei ke}).\textsuperscript{47} The different perceptions of the relationship between \textit{tianzi} and \textit{tianxia} led to different views of the nature of bureaucratic service. Because \textit{tianxia} was so large and could not be ruled by the emperor alone, as Huang Zongxi proceeded to argue, the governance had to be a collective effort joined by many men of talent and wisdom. To enter officialdom, therefore, “was for the sake of \textit{tianxia} rather than the sovereign, for the sake of myriads of people rather than one family.” Unfortunately, as Huang lamented, many of his contemporaries mistakenly thought that official positions were instituted by the emperor and for the emperor: “The sovereign allocated me part of his \textit{tianxia} to govern, and the sovereign gave me some of his people to rule. All the people under heaven were thus seen as private property in the sovereign’s pocket.”\textsuperscript{48}

As we know, the relationship between \textit{tianzi} and \textit{tianxia} in imperial China was never black-and-white but always subtle and complex. However, at a time when the imperial power was usurping the moral supremacy from the \textit{daotong}, making this distinction became many scholars’ strategy in challenging the moral standing of the sovereign. Even though there is little evidence for direct influence on Wu Jingzi from either Gu Yanwu or Huang Zongxi, the legacy of Gu and Yan certainly had an enormous impact on the general intellectual climate of Wu’s time.\textsuperscript{49} The literati’s stupefaction in confusing \textit{tianzi} with \textit{tianxia}, which was spiritedly
attacked by Gu and Huang, is caustically satirized in *The Scholars*. Almost everyone that attempts to gain moral capital by approaching the imperial power eventually suffers moral bankruptcy. In contrast, the high-minded scholars in the novel are well aware of the distinction between servitude to the imperial state and dedication to society. Following Wang Mian, Du Shaoqing refuses the invitation to participate in the special examinations, even going to the extreme of feigning illness, as he knows he will not be allowed to achieve anything as an official (*RLWS* 393; *Scholars* 425). Compared to the somewhat unconventional and unbridled Du, Zhuang Shaoguang is obviously a more orthodox Confucian. When the emperor summons him to the capital for an audience, he feels obligated to go as a subject, but his attitude toward an official appointment is quite similar to Du’s. When he realizes that “it does not seem as if our Confucian ways will avail in this age" (*wo dao bu xing*) he requests to be allowed to return home immediately (*RLWS* 411; *Scholars* 445).

For both Du and Zhuang, a political relationship to the sovereign becomes completely meaningless if it does not facilitate the Confucian moral agenda. In Zhuang’s case, what seems to prevent him from a more thoroughgoing conversation with the emperor on the issues of ritual and music is “a stab of pain on the top of his head” that is caused, as he finds out later outside the palace, by a scorpion in his cap (*RLWS* 411–12; *Scholars* 445). Yet the sting of the scorpion is not exactly the unexpected mishap that it appears to be, for Zhuang already made up his mind to decline any offer of official appointment even before his departure from home, when he promised his wife that he would “come straight back” (*RLWS* 403; *Scholars* 436). The scorpion therefore serves as a painful reminder of the predicament he is in—“It does not seem as if our Confucian ways will avail in this age”—rather than the cause of it.

Yu Yude, “the number one person in the work” (*shuzhong diyi ren*) as the commentator in the Woxian Caotang edition calls him, is not completely averse to bureaucratic service, but totally indifferent to rank and fame. He receives the *jinshi* degree at the age of fifty. While appointing other candidates in their fifties or sixties as Hanlin academicians, the emperor consigns Yu, the only old candidate who reports his true age, to be a professor at the Imperial Academy in Nanjing. Yu, on his part, is actually happy for being pushed away from the center of political power in Beijing. He lives contentedly with his family in Nanjing on his mod-
The Scholars

est salary and heartedly enjoys making friends and practicing virtue. Du Shaoqing compares him to the ancient sages of Bo Yi and Liuxia Hui as well as the fifth-century hermitic poet Tao Yuanming (RLWS 425; Scholars 461). Among the three, as a modern Chinese scholar suggests, the closest parallel for Yu should be Liuxia Hui (fl. 634 BCE), to whom Mencius gave this commendation: “Liuxia Hui was not ashamed of a prince with a tarnished reputation; neither did he disdain a modest post. When in office, he did not conceal his talent, and always acted in accordance with the Way. When he was passed over he harbored no grudge, nor was he distressed even in straitened circumstances.” That is the reason Mencius gave him the honorific title “the sage who was easy-going” (sheng zhi he zhe). Like Liuxia Hui, Yu Yude maintains an eremitical mentality while serving on an official post, and thus becomes a “hermit within officialdom” (liyin). Impervious to the temptations of rank and fame, Yu is unaffected by any change to his status and remains unperturbed by any material losses or gains. Compared to Du Shaoqing’s resolute boycott of the state’s recruitment, Yu’s “hermitage within officialdom” represents a more sophisticated form of detachment from the imperial power. It allows office holding to be considered a way of living without compromising one’s moral integrity and intellectual independence.

**BEIJING AND NANJING: A TALE OF TWO CITIES**

One can thus consider Yu Yude’s departure from Beijing for Nanjing after his reception of the jinshi degree more than just a geographical relocation. “Nanjing is a fine place,” he exclaims with joy, and considers his teaching job in Nanjing much better than that of a Hanlin acadeimician in the “northern capital” (RLWS 422; Scholars 458). That enthusiasm for Nanjing is, significantly, shared by his friends. To answer his wife’s question why he has declined the court’s invitation to become an official, Du Shaoqing calls it “absurd” (dai) to leave Nanjing for Beijing. While he and his wife can go out “in the spring and autumn to look at the flowers and drink wine” in Nanjing, Beijing, according to him, “is a cold place,” and “one gust of wind there would freeze [one] to death” (RLWS 395; Scholars 427–28). In a similar vein, Zhuang Shaoguang, on his way back home from Beijing, cries out in delight as his boat approaches Nanjing: “Today I shall see the beauties of the Yangtze again” (RLWS 414; Scholars 449).
Wu Jingzi of course lived in Nanjing for many years and was very fond of the city. In his *Yijia fu* he offers a description of his leisured and uninhibited life there: “Outside the house were brilliant flowers, and above the curtain was a shining sun. The gentle breeze brushed the bamboos in the yard, and [in winter] the fallen snow stopped at the window screen. I was often skillfully and casually catching lice on my body, or looking above following the soaring geese with my eyes.” What most significantly enriched his life in Nanjing, however, was the spiritual companionship of the literati who had lived in the city in the past, especially Ji Kang, Ruan Ji, and others of the Six Dynasties period who were known for their unbridled expressions of political dissent. That was the reason that Wu Jingzi would, again in his own words, “think of those outstanding figures of the Six Dynasties, and suddenly become sad and shed tears” (*Diao Liudai zhi yingcai, hu chuangyan er yunti*). The same sentiment is expressed in such lines in *Wenmu shanfang ji*:

Incidentally I purchased a residence on the Qinhuai River,  
So much better I liked it than I did my native village.  
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
As I was to live in seclusion,  
I invited Ruan Ji and Ji Kang;  
Coats draping on our shoulders and our legs extended,  
We drank till we were all blue.56

Nanjing, the cultural center of Jiangnan, was traditionally where literati assembled, and Wu Jingzi identified particularly with those historical figures in Nanjing who were banished from the center of political power. Like the novelist, the high-minded scholars in *The Scholars* clearly share an enthusiasm for Nanjing, which becomes even stronger in contrast to their indifference toward Beijing. The novel almost presents Nanjing as the capital for the literati, in counterpoise to Beijing as the political center of the empire.57

As mentioned earlier, it is a scholarly consensus that the ritual in honor of Tai Bo in chapter 37 marks the climax of the novel. Tai Bo, as the legend goes, was the oldest son of King Tai of Western Zhou (Xi Zhou) and heir apparent to the throne. As he found out that his father favored his nephew Ji Chang, he ran away to the Jiangnan area of Wu so that King Tai could
pass on the throne to his third son Ji Li and through Ji Li to Ji Chang, who was to become King Wen (Wen Wang). Meanwhile, Tai Bo became the founder of the Wu civilization. In the Confucian tradition, Tai Bo was venerated as the one who embodied “supreme virtue” (zhide) by his persistent yielding (rang) of the throne.58 As he relinquished political power and worked instead to promote the well-being of the people in a less culturally developed area, he also exemplified the Confucian ideal of rushi that, as Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi understood it, upheld service for tianxia above service for guo or tianzi.

Chi Hengshan, the initiator of the project of the Tai Bao temple, praises Tai Bo as “the worthiest man our Nanjing has produced, past or present” (RLWS 393; Scholars 425). By identifying Tai Bo with Nanjing, Chi also identifies himself and his friends in Nanjing with the ancient sage who moved here from the political center in the north. The ritual in the temple is therefore not only a tribute to Tai Bo himself, but also a celebration of the spirit of “yielding” that the scholars have inherited from their ancient precursor. In that sense the high-minded literati’s migrations to Nanjing, especially Yu Yude’s, can be considered lesser replicas of the classical paradigm set by Tai Bo. While the scholars in pursuit of fame and status yearn for the center of imperial power in Beijing, Nanjing becomes the destination for those who have higher goals in life than a bureaucratic position.

Interestingly, the narrative of the Tai Bo ceremony is preceded almost immediately by the account of another ceremony in chapter 35, the ceremony at the imperial palace right before Zhuang Shaoguang’s reception in audience with the emperor. Part of the account goes as follows: “In the glare of a hundred torches the prime minister arrived, Wu Men, the main gate, was opened, and the officials entered through side gates. They proceeded through Fengtian Gate to Fengtian Palace, where heavenly music was being played and they could barely hear the herald bid them take their places. A whip cracked three times, eunuchs trooped out from the inner palace bearing golden censers of ambergris, and palace maids with long-handled fans escorted the emperor to his throne. Then the officials hailed the Son of Heaven and prostrated themselves in obeisance” (RLWS 409; Scholars 443).

It is apparently a ceremony that heightens the awe-inspiring imperial authority and dramatizes the submission of the officials to the throne. Right before the ritual, it is announced in an imperial edict: “We have
heard that a good sovereign reveres his ministers as teachers. Indeed, this has been proved true since ancient times” (RLWS 409; Scholars 443). The ruler-ministers relationship demonstrated in this ceremony renders those words from the emperor a caustic mockery of the once-revered tradition of the daotong. Thus the juxtaposition of these two ceremonies, one at the imperial court in Beijing and the other at the Tai Bo temple in Nanjing, becomes profoundly meaningful. While the former celebrates the imperial’s appropriation of the daotong, the latter is a symbolic gesture to evoke the intellectuals’ autonomy and independence of the state power. A modern Chinese critic has compared the congregation of the scholars at the Tai Bo ceremony to the assemblage of the Liangshan bandit heroes in Water Margin. Indeed, the analogy does not stop with the similar structural function of the gathering of the characters. The ritual performed by the literati in the Tai Bo temple, though not as blatant a revolt as the Liangshan rebellion, is presented clearly as a political gesture as it serves as a counterweight to the ceremony at the imperial court.

SNARED IN A TEXTUAL CULTURE: THE OBSESSION WITH SAMPLE EXAMINATION ESSAYS

In chapter 34, having declined the invitation to participate in the special examinations, Du Shaoqing exclaims to himself joyfully, “Good! This is the end of my career as a licentiate. I shall not sit for the provincial examination or the yearly tests again, but take life easy and attend to my own affairs” (RLWS 396; Scholars 428). This outcry of relief posits an opposition between the examinations and a literatus’s “own affairs.” However, how does the state power intervene and manipulate the literati’s intellectual agenda and prevent them from “attending to [their] own affairs?”

The Scholars provides a panoramic exposition of the dynamics between the state and the literati in different sectors of textual culture. The most prominent sector is no doubt that of examination learning, especially the writing of the eight-legged essay (bagu wen). It should be noted that, while the examination system was attacked by numerous literary figures, the eight-legged essay as a form of prose was not without its merit. Even Huang Zongxi, one of the fiercest early Qing critics of the examination system, gave this form of prose writing its due as he included seventy-eight prefaces to a variety of bagu collections in Ming wenhai. Even when the
eight-legged essay was under attack, in many cases people treated it as a synecdoche for the examination system, rather than as a form of essay writing per se. What was more controversial, however, was the content of the writing, or what was actually carried by the vehicle of the essay. Liang Zhangju (1775–1849) summarized two conflicting attitudes toward the content of the bagu essays among Qing scholars: “Those who respect it say that the essay establishes words on behalf of the sages and worthies [dai shengren liyan] and that the writing leads to the dao [yin wen jian dao]. . . . Those who look down on it say that the essay carries nothing but empty words and therefore has no practical use at all.”62 Neither side, as Liang insisted, had the whole truth, but it was a fact that by the eighteenth century scholars had become much less interested in, if not completely disillusioned with, the alleged moral function of the eight-legged essay as the appropriate vehicle for expounding the Confucian teachings. That change was reflected in the scholarly discussions of the eight-legged essay, which shifted their focus from the content of the writing to the essay format and style.63 “In the evolution of prose theory,” as Stephen Roddy rightly states, “we can detect a definite trend toward the weakening of an ethical linkage between the essay form and the teachings of the classics and Four Books.”64

There were multiple reasons for this exaltation of form over content. Apparently, an immediate reason was the proliferation of anthologies of successful examination essays. Gu Yanwu complained about the easy availability of such sample writings and deplored their foul influence: “People in the empire know these are things that can enable you to succeed in the examinations and to enjoy fame and prestige. They call these books scholarship, and read no other books at all.” Gu therefore saw a reason to be concerned that the formalistic imitation of the sample essays would lead to a neglect of the moral teachings in the classics: “Alas! The eight-legged essay is flourishing while the Six Classics are declining. The eighteen-hall writings are rising while the Twenty-One Histories are abandoned” (Bagu sheng er liujing wei, shibafang xing er nianyishi fei).65 Qing government certainly understood the importance of establishing textual models as a manner of ideological control and as part of the process of preparing the examination candidates. In the early Qing, the state and private publishers actually competed with each other in producing collections of sample bagu essays. Particularly popular were collections compiled by Lü
Liuliang, a Ming loyalist and recognized scholar in classic learning who had failed to pass the provincial examination. However, the government soon banned publication and circulation of model examination essays by private booksellers, and virtually monopolized the business itself. In 1723, Emperor Yongzheng put the Board of Rites (Libu) and the Hanlin Academy in charge of selecting model eight-legged essays to be collected in anthologies. Soon after his ascension in 1735, Emperor Qianlong authorized Fang Bao (1668–1749) to compile an official collection of examination essays, which came out in 1740 under the title *Imperially Authorized Edition of Essays on the Four Books* (Qiding Sishuwen). Following its publication, the court repeatedly demanded that the criteria set forth in the imperial anthology, which became the official reference for examiners, be strictly observed in the local and metropolitan examinations.

By setting these officially endorsed textual models for all examination candidates, the Manchu state attempted to curb all examination writings within the frame of neo-Confucian orthodoxy. In the meantime, as the government enforced the standard of the model essays, they became the key to success in the examinations and opened up a shortcut to *gongming*. For many pursuers of fame and status, these selected essays superseded the Confucian canon itself as the most essential readings. They became more concerned with the formal features of the model essays than with the moral and ethical content of the classics. The situation became even worse than that in the seventeenth century as described by Gu Yanwu, simply because the new anthologies of eight-legged essays had the backing of the political authorities.

Wu Jingzi’s composition of *The Scholars* coincided with the prevalence of the official editions of eight-legged essays, especially the *Imperially Authorized Edition of Essays on the Four Books*. The rage of the model eight-legged essays that Wu may have witnessed is well documented in his novel. In chapter 15, Ma Chunshang urges Kuang Chaoren to start preparing for the examinations. After citing the cliché—“In study one finds golden mansions, one finds bushels of rice, and one finds beautiful women”—the compiler of bagu anthologies acclaims the value of the model examination essays with this rhetorical question: “What is study today if not our anthologies of selected bagu compositions?” (*RLWS* 193; *Scholars* 203, translation modified). Wei Tishan, another compiler of bagu anthologies, is equally boastful: “Only those essays selected and anno-
tated by us are assured of immortality” (RLWS 223; Scholars 237). As the novel is set in the Ming period, Ma, Wei, and others in the trade are all private editors, but they frequently suggest that the criteria for bagu composition is ultimately determined by the state, and that they are the ones who can demonstrate and explicate the relationship between the imperial power and the stylistic changes in the examination writing. In a conversation with Qu Xianfu in chapter 13, Ma Chunshang observes that “during the reigns of Hongwu and Yongle we find one style, and during the reigns of Chenghua and Hongzhi another” (RLWS 166; Scholars 172). Wei Tishan echoes this almost verbatim in chapter 15. When Kuang Chaoren expresses his perplexity about the rules on bagu composition, Wei delivers this admonition to the younger scholar: “Essays express the teachings of the sages, and they must be written according to definite rules, unlike other frivolous forms of literature which you may write as you please. Thus from an essay you should be able to see not only the writer’s rank and fortune, but also whether the empire is passing through a period of prosperity or decline. The Hongwu and Yongle periods had one set of rules; the Chenghua and Hongzhi periods had another. Each reign has its particular rules which have been handed down from one group of scholars to another, forming an orthodox tradition” (RLWS 223; Scholars 236–37).

Interestingly, what Ma and Wei describe here is precisely the way the Imperially Authorized Edition of Essays on the Four Books was organized, which consisted of five collections (ji) with each of the first four devoted to the reign periods of two Ming emperors and the fifth to the Qing. Thus, the first collection included essays from the Chenghua (1465–88) and Hongzhi (1488–1506) periods, the second from the Zhengde (1506–22) and Jiajing (1522–67) periods, and so forth. Whether by Ma’s and Wei’s words the novelist alludes to the Imperially Authorized Edition of Essays on the Four Books remains unclear, but it is evident that the novel, using Ma and Wei as mouthpieces, associates the evolution of the bagu writing to manipulation from the political authorities.

Thus the imperial state, as the novel suggests, is to blame for vitiating most of the ethical content of the examinations and turning it largely into a play of form. While the examination writing was supposed to “establish words on behalf of the sages and worthies,” the candidates’ reiteration of the Confucian moral philosophy always had to be constricted into a stylistic form dictated by the state, for political purposes that could change
from one period to the next. That is exactly what Ma Chunshang implies in this observation:

By the Tang dynasty, scholars were chosen for their ability to write poetry. Even if a man could talk like Confucius or Mencius, it would not get him a post; so all the Tang scholars learned to write poems. That was the civil service of the Tang dynasty. By the Song dynasty, it was even better: all the officials had to be philosophers. That was why the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi propagated neo-Confucianism. That was the civil service of the Song dynasty. Nowadays, however, we use essays to select scholars, and this is the best criterion of all. Even Confucius, 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? Because that kind of talk would get him nowhere: nobody would give him an official position. No, the old sage would find it impossible to realize his ideal. (RLWS 168; Scholars 174)

The message here is clear: what can possibly lead to an official position is not so much faithful adherence to the moral teachings of the ancient sages as perfect conformity to the form of writing endorsed by the imperial state.

THE TEXTUAL CRISIS OF NEO-CNFUCIANISM

Another factor that contributed to the estrangement of form from content in examination writing was the imperial state’s stance on what can be called a textual crisis of neo-Confucianism itself. With the movement of evidential scholarship on the rise, the early decades of the eighteenth century witnessed a growing distrust of the Cheng-Zhu exegetical tradition. Back in the early Qing, Chen Que (1604–77) had forcefully and daringly challenged the authenticity of the Great Learning (Daxue), a text that was long believed to have been authored by Confucius’s disciple Zeng Shen (505–436 BCE) and regarded as a cornerstone of the Cheng-Zhu school of learning.79 Chen’s contemporary Pan Pingge (1610–77) also attacked both the Cheng-Zhu and the Lu-Wang schools as being adulterations with either Buddhism or Daoism. Decades later, the meticulous textual study by Yan Ruoqu (1636–1704) confirmed definitively a long-standing doubt
that the Old Text portion of the *Book of Documents* (Shangshu), a perennial component of the examination curriculum, was not written by the ancient sage-kings as had long been assumed but a forgery of much later dating. Another scholar, Hu Wei (1633–1714), was able to reveal that the so-called *Diagram of the Great Ultimate* (Taiji tu), which served as the foundation for the cosmology of the neo-Confucian pioneer Zhou Dunyi (1017–73), actually was of a Daoist origin. Such scholarly findings severely damaged the textual integrity of the neo-Confucian orthodoxy, which, consequently, lost much of its halo among the literati during the early half of the eighteenth century.

In the meantime, the Manchu state was concerned that the results of such philological studies might lead to ideological disturbances and impair their political control over the educated elite. Supported by some conservative Confucian scholar-officials, the imperial government repeatedly refused to make adjustments to the examination curriculum to accommodate the new scholarly developments. In the 1690s and the 1740s, for instance, scholars submitted memorials to the throne calling for elimination of the Old Text portion of the *Book of Documents* from the official text used in the examinations, but each time the request was ignored. In the metropolitan examinations of 1730 and 1737, the Old Text continued to be cited in the questions “with no indication of the philological controversy surrounding its authenticity.” Even as many results of evidential studies gained general acceptance, “those who aspired to enter the civil service were still better off studying in the Zhu Xi tradition.”

It was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that evidential scholarship finally managed to find its way to the metropolitan examinations. Even then, the change was largely confined to the policy questions of Session Three, while the much more important Sessions One and Two “remained, for the most part, unchanged in content and governed by orthodox Cheng-Zhu interpretations.”

There was thus an evident incongruity between the diminished authority of the neo-Confucian texts in the larger scholarly world and the continued dominance of the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy within the examination regime itself. The damaged textual integrity weakened the credibility of the moral teachings in the neo-Confucian canon. In *The Scholars*, Du Shaoqing is one of those who are perceptive enough to see this not as a problem of the Song neo-Confucians themselves but of the forces behind
the ideological manipulation. His complaint in chapter 34 is thus highly pertinent: When Zhu Xi put forward his opinions, he perhaps expected posterity to compare them with others. It was only because of “the narrow-mindedness of later generations” that Zhu’s words became unfairly lifted to the height of infallible and untouchable authority (RLWS 400; Scholars 433). If the Cheng-Zhu school were treated as one voice amid many others, the flaws in its textual corpus would have been condoned without causing much uproar. However, since it was now the core of the examination curriculum and thus the passport to officialdom, scholars were compelled to follow certain texts of questionable status. In other words, they had to read and write what they did not truly believe. Consequently, the examinations became largely a business of texts and writings, and the ethical messages became something on paper only and largely extraneous to the real world.

Much of the degeneration of the literati mores in The Scholars can be attributed to the divorce of form from content and of textual discourse from real-world practice. Fan Jin, right after his success in the provincial examinations, totally disregards the ritual propriety taught in the Confucian classics. He feels no qualms devouring “large shrimp balls” during the mourning period for his mother, while hypocritically insisting on using bamboo chopsticks instead of silver or ivory ones (RLWS 58; Scholars 58). In the case of Kuang Chaoren, his moral deterioration coincides with his diligent study of the classics in preparation for the examinations. Beyond their textual existence, the teachings in the classics have no efficacy for him other than serving as a stepping-stone to fame and rank. Elsewhere, Mr. Gao, a reader in the Hanlin Academy, calls Du Shaoqing’s father, the late Prefect Du, a “fool” (daizi) because the older Du is said to have taken the moral messages on paper too seriously: “While in office he showed no respect for his superiors but simply tried to please the people, talking nonsense about ‘fostering filial piety and brotherly love, and encouraging agriculture.’ Such phrases are mere figures of speech to be used in compositions, yet he took them seriously, with the result that his superiors disliked him and removed him from his post” (RLWS 398; Scholars 431).

It should be noted here that the imperial state was by no means unaware of the moral detriment caused by this disconnection between text and praxis. Emperor Kangxi, in particular, took a strong personal dislike to those scholar-officials who paid only lip service to the moral teachings in the Confucian canon. As early as 1663, the emperor approved the
The Scholars

memorial from the Board of Rites to discontinue the eight-legged essay in both provincial and metropolitan examinations, but had to reverse that decision only five years later. In Wu Jingzi’s time, Shu-ho-te (1711–77), a Manchu official well versed in the classics, stated in a 1744 memorial to Emperor Qianlong: “Today’s contemporary-style essays [shiwen, i.e., eight-legged essays] are nothing but empty words and cannot be applied to any use. This is the foremost reason why the civil examinations are inadequate for selecting men.” What he said was obviously true, even to the Manchu rulers themselves. Then why did the imperial state keep the form of the examination writing in place while knowing its defects? An answer was provided by the Manchu official O-erh-tai (1680–1745), a staunch apologist for the examination system: “It is not that I don’t know that the eight-legged essay is useless. But for the purpose of captivating scholars of aspirations [laolong zhishi] and commanding men of talent [quce rencai], there is no better means.” The eight-legged essay, after all, was more than merely empty words; for the imperial power, the form itself became a most effective strategy of political control and ideological manipulation.

POETIC TEXTS AND THE LITERARY INQUISITION

Following the practice of the Ming, the Manchu state prioritized the examination essay over bellettristic writing in its prescribed agenda for the literati. In chapter 3 of *The Scholars*, Zhou Jin, the education commissioner, reprimands a young candidate who has showed some liking for poetic composition: “Since the emperor attaches importance to essays, why should you bring up the poems of the Han and Tang dynasties?” He denigrates the poetic composition as “heterodox studies” (zalan) while upholding the practice of the examination essay as the “real work” (zhengwu) (RLWS 36–37; Scholars 36). To indicate the extent to which that agenda was embraced by the educated gentry, the novel presents a bagu fanatic: Qu Xianfu’s wife, Miss Lu (Lu Xiaojie). She faithfully follows her father’s exhortation that mastery of the skills in the eight-legged essay writing is a prerequisite for any other genres of literary composition, even though as a woman she clearly will win no official appointment with her assiduous practice of the essay. When Qu Xianfu is asked to demonstrate his skills with the eight-legged essay, he disappoints both his wife and father-in-law with two compositions that bear more resemblance to
poetry than examination writing (RLWS 140–41; Scholars 142–44). For Ma Chunshang, the eight-legged essay is a pure form of writing that should not be adulterated with any “poetical sensibility” (cifu qi), which “is likely to have a bad influence on later scholars” (RLWS 166; Scholars 172). To be sure, much of this is based on genre considerations, but clearly the reverence for the eight-legged essay depicted in the novel demonstrates the impact of the state policy on the literary taste of the day: the political value of the form was translated into an aesthetic value.

Yet the imperial state’s focus on the examination essay does not mean it treated other sectors of textual culture with a laissez-faire attitude. In The Scholars, poetic composition, while not quite as prominent and privileged as examination writing, is another important cultural activity for the literati, particularly those who ostensibly have given up their aspirations for a bureaucratic career. It is thus another contact zone between the literati and the state. The amateur poets in the novel, Jing Lanjiang, Zhao Xuezhai, and others, are depicted as a bunch of shams who “do not have rank or wealth and therefore envy others who do,” as the commentator of the Woxian Caotang edition put it. In chapter 18, Zhi Jianfeng, a merchant and self-proclaimed poet, almost gets arrested by the patrolling police for gesticulating on the street and wearing a scholar’s hat in his drunkenness. Apart from that brief episode, the state power seems to leave these poets alone in their self-deluded dream for fame and prestige. That, however, is not true, for looming largely in the background is the turbulence surrounding the manuscript copy of a collection of poems by Gao Qi (1336–74), an early Ming scholar-official who was executed by Emperor Hongwu allegedly for his seditious writings.

Several characters in the novel are involved in the turmoil centered on Gao Qi’s writings. The manuscript is initially in the possession of Wang Hui, a treasonous official who is on the run as a fugitive after the rebellion he has been implicated in is put down. From the perspective of the imperial state, that the texts originally belonged to a rebel may have augmented their subversive power. Indeed, they may appear to be an even more dangerous and enduring menace than the rebellion itself, for the court continues to hunt them down long after its military triumph over the revolt. When Qu Xianfu receives the manuscript in a casket from Wang Hui, he puts it in print, setting his own name on it as editor. After winning some fame for him initially, Qu’s ownership of the manuscript quickly becomes
a liability. His mutinous servant blackmails him by threatening to use the casket for the manuscript as evidence for Qu’s tie to Wang Hui. Qu is in real trouble until Ma Chunshang comes to his rescue by redeeming the casket with the royalties on his anthologies of model eight-legged essays. That, however, does not end the case, which resurfaces in chapter 35. On his way to Beijing for an audience with the emperor, Zhuang Shaoguang meets Lu Xinhou, a young scholar who has managed to collect works of all famous writers of the Ming dynasty, including those by Gao Qi. To his new friend Zhuang offers this cautionary advice: “Your interest in old books shows your respect for learning, sir. But it is better to have nothing to do with forbidden books. Although there is nothing treasonable in the writings of Gao Qingqiu [i.e. Gao Qi], since Emperor Hongwu took a dislike to him and his works are now banned, I would advise you not to read them” (RLWS 408; Scholars 442). Zhuang Shaoguang is obviously seasoned enough to know that the state power is too formidable for a scholar to mess with. Sure enough, Lu Xinhou is arrested while paying a visit to Zhuang in Nanjing, and Zhuang has to use his newly gained influence with some dignitaries in Beijing to get his friend released.

What happens in the novel surrounding Gao Qi’s writings, according to a Qing critic, may allude to the case of Dai Mingshi, who was executed by Emperor Kangxi in 1713. A closer parallel, however, may be the traumatic experience of Wu Jingzi’s friend Liu Zhu. In 1733, Liu, while visiting Cheng Tingzuo, was wrongly accused of carrying a forbidden book and consequently tortured and imprisoned for seven years. Yet, as the Gao Qi case in the novel involves multiple characters and different locales, it makes more sense to consider it not so much as an allusion to any specific case but rather as an epitome of the rampant literary inquisition during the early half of the eighteenth century in general. That conjecture is reasonable, because literary inquisition, following the Dai Mingshi case in the late Kangxi reign, became even more intensified during the Yongzheng period.

The case of Gao Qi’s poetic manuscript, therefore, reflects the political climate of Wu Jingzi’s time. For those amateur poets in the novel, it represents a potential disaster lurking in the background, and renders their fantasies about fame and prestige all the more ludicrous. The thematic thread of poetic writing may appear extraneous to the topic of the examinations, which is obviously a major concern in much of the narrative. Yet,
if one reads *The Scholars* as a fictional approach to the power relations between the literati and the imperial state, one may argue that the juxtaposition of examination writing and poetic writing in the novel is actually part of a masterful structural design, which encompasses writings in and out of the examination system as two major sectors of textual culture that are separate but related. Combined, they form a panoramic picture of the literati indulgence in a textual culture largely insulated from other aspects of social reality. In both sectors, “textual composition is taken as the stepping-stone for fame and rank” (*yi weizi wei gongming zhi jie*) as the commentator in the Qixingtang edition put it.84

**THE ENDEAVORS TO BREAK OUT OF THE TEXTUAL CULTURE**

In contrast to most of their fellow scholars, the few “true Confucians” (*zhēn ru*) are on a quest for a spiritual renewal of the literati. Du Shao-qing’s proclamation to “attend to my own affairs” while turning down the invitation to take the examinations can be considered, in an enlarged context, a common manifesto of these high-minded scholars to seek a certain degree of autonomy. Among their own affairs, one of the most important is the ceremony in the Tai Bo temple. The selection of Tai Bo from among the many ancient sages is in itself significant, as there is no way to better express their determination to detach themselves from the imperial power than paying tribute to “the forefather to all eremites throughout the ages.”85 As a gesture to reject the bait of rank and fame from the state, the ceremony itself reverberates with the ancient sage’s escape from court politics.

It is no longer a new topic in modern scholarship that Wu Jingzi may have received influence, especially via his friend Cheng Tingzuo, from Yan Yuan and Li Gong.86 At the kernel of Yan-Li thought was a critical skepticism of the epistemological function of textual discourse without the proof and support from praxis. For Yan Yuan, the most crucial phase in the process of knowledge acquisition, as suggested by the name of his study Xizhai (Studio of Practice), was to “use the hands to actually do the thing” (*fanshou shizuo qi shi*).87 Li Gong, while in his later years showing more interest in textual studies than Yan, agreed with his master that “the ancients comprehended the principle by the means of facts and actions
“Without seeing in your own eyes and trying it in person,” he asked rhetorically, “how can you tell what truth is?” Yan and Li thus pointed to a new direction for intellectual and moral cultivation, superseding textual scholarship with “substantial learning” (shixue), which included, in particular, the practice of ritual, music, martial training, and farming (li yue bing nong). One may therefore consider the ritual in the Tai Bo temple a major attempt by the “true Confucians” to extricate themselves from the “empty words” on paper and start “actually doing the thing.” It is in that spirit that Chi Hengshan, upon proposing the Tai Bo project to Du Shaoqing, complains about many of their contemporaries’ indulgence in the bagu composition and poetic writing while neglecting the practice of ritual and music. Chi continues to justify his proposal to build the Tai Bo temple by saying: “There is not a single temple [in Nanjing] dedicated to him, though you find temples to the God of Literature (Wenchang Miao) and God Guan (Guandi Miao) everywhere” (RLWS 393; Scholars 425, translation modified). Clearly, Chi opposes Tai Bo to the two deities that are popularly believed to be guardians of literature and writing.

The Tai Bo ceremony thus signifies the effort of the “true Confucians” to detach themselves from the imperial power on two different but related levels. By honoring Tai Bo, they openly identify with the ancient sage who walked away from the court to promote the welfare of the people in the culturally backward south, demonstrating more loyalty to tianxia than the state. In the meantime, the practice of the ritual marks their tentative endeavor to break out of a textual culture that the imperial power manipulates with the lure of examination degrees on one hand and the threat of literary inquisition on the other. Finally, Du Shaoqing and his friends are able to fulfill their wish to “attend to their own affairs.” Indeed, starting with chapter 31, where scholars begin the congregation in Nanjing that eventually leads to the Tai Bo ceremony, the narrative seems to shift its focus away from textual culture, which is clearly in the spotlight in the early portions of the novel. Right after the Tai Bo ritual in chapter 37 a narrative stretch about a series of actions begins. In chapter 38, Guo Tieshan embarks on an arduous trek in search of his long-missing father, punctuated by Guo’s hazardous encounters with monsters and bandits. The journey is depicted clearly as a ritualized expression of filial devotion. Chapter 39 tells about Xiao Yunxian’s martial feat and Marshal
Ping’s (Ping Shaobao) successful campaign against the mutinous tribesmen. In chapter 40, Xiao Yunxian, as both a local administrator and a garrison commander, leads the efforts in constructing farmland and irrigation systems and building new schools. The chapter also features a ceremony to worship the God of Agriculture (Xiannong). The narrative interest in actions continues in chapter 43, which is about General Tang’s (Tang Zongzhen) suppression of the Miao tribesmen’s rebellion. Clearly, this portion of the novel is devoted to the practice of ritual, music, martial training, and farming.

The story of Shen Qiongzhi, in chapters 40 and 41, may appear to be a digression. A young woman running away from an arranged marriage to a salt merchant, Shen commands much admiration from the reader for her courage and defiance. In the meantime, however, some of her behaviors—such as stealing the gold and silver utensils from the merchant’s house in a manner reminiscent of the bandit hero Lu Zhishen in Water Margin and selling poems openly on the streets of Nanjing—may reveal, in Stephen Roddy’s words, “a willingness to flaunt standards of female propriety.” In that regard her story may seem to undercut the theme of reviving the practice of ritual. Yet, upon a closer examination, the story of the woman escaping her imposed status as a concubine parallels the scholars’ endeavor to break away from servitude to the imperial power. Both Shen Qiongzhi and the scholars have to get out of their confinement—a boudoir for the woman and closed studios for the scholars—to seek liberation in the larger world. Even the story of the dissipated Tang brothers in chapter 42 may not be completely irrelevant to the other chapters in this stretch. As the Tangs are dandies who speak of their experience in the examinations while visiting prostitutes, they in a way signify the tarnished and almost morbid examination culture that contrasts sharply with the dynamic and robust world of actions presented elsewhere in this part of the novel.

IS TEXTUAL CULTURE AN IMPENETRABLE PRISON HOUSE?

To be sure, the major characters involved in the later portion of the novel—Guo Tieshan, Xiao Yunxian, Marshal Ping, and General Tang—are most likely educated men but not necessarily scholars by profession. Yet they
The Scholars

The Scholars seem to sustain the effort that the scholars themselves have initiated at the Tai Bo ceremony: to renounce the world of texts that has become corrupted by rank and fame and to revive true Confucian ethics in praxis. However, the result, as it becomes known before long, is highly paradoxical. The Tai Bo ceremony is obviously a big success and goes a long way in restoring the forgotten tradition of ritual practice, as evidenced by the reaction of the old Nanjing natives among the audience who are enthralled by the event, which they have never before witnessed (RLWS 437; Scholars 473). Yet the narration of the ritual in chapter 37, which has long been considered as the climax of the novel, may appear instead “singularly anticlimactic,” as a Western scholar has put it. It is unbearably tedious and monotonous, in contrast to the enthusiastic reception of the ceremony itself by the audience. Indeed, what one reads in chapter 37, “a bald summary of the proceedings,” may well be the same thing as the program of the ceremony (yizhudan) and order of the processions (zhishidatan) that Wang Yuhui reads in chapter 48 on the dust-covered wall, when he visits the ruined Tai Bo temple years later (RLWS 558; Scholars 607). As Shang Wei has pointed out with much insight, the account of the Tai Bo ceremony, which may be based on some Confucian ritual manual, ends up becoming another copy of that manual. It is a symbolic moment when the significance of the ritual practice becomes cancelled: if the ritual was an endeavor by the scholars to break out of the world of texts, they have instead come full circle and arrived in exactly the same place from where they departed. In this aspect, the novel again shows a strong affinity with Water Margin, where the rebels eventually capitulate to the imperial court and thus cause no change to the social order. However, by dramatizing the futility of the literati’s efforts to extricate themselves from the textual swamp, the novelist also bestows a certain amount of tragic heroism on such efforts.

One character that embodies this retrogression to texts is Xiao Yunxian, who ironically also exemplifies the ideal of li yue bing nong more fully than anyone else. The district under Xiao’s governance enjoys harmony and prosperity on a scale that contrasts sharply with the poverty and chaos that Zhuang Shaoguang witnesses elsewhere on his way to the capital. Ironically, however, in the schools that Xiao has established, children are not taught how to practice li yue bing nong, but how to write well formulated bagu essays. Just like the other men of success and abilities
such as Marshal Ping and General Tang, Xiao Yunxian is deprived by the imperial state of the rewards he fully deserves. When Xiao meets Wu Shu in chapter 40, he expresses his admiration for Wu’s poems, and then requests that the scholar honor his achievements in writing so that they “will not be forgotten.” In response, Wu promises to “confer immortality” on Xiao’s adventures and “rescue them from oblivion” (RLWS 469; Scholars 507–8). In the end, Xiao Yunxian, the disillusioned man of action, has to seek shelter in written words.

In Wang Yuhui the inertia of textual culture finds a most profound expression. As an old licentiate, Wang obviously has given up any hope for an official appointment. Taking everything in the Cheng-Zhu doctrine as literally true, he is another “pedantic scholar” (shudaizi), not unlike the other aged licentiate Ni Shuangfeng in chapter 25, whose decades of study of the “lifeless dogma” (sishu) leads him to destitution. However, unlike Ni who turns to mending musical instruments for a livelihood, Wang remains steadfast in his pursuit of the textual truth. Devoting his time to compiling three books, “one on ceremony, one on etymology, and one on country etiquette” (RLWS 551; Scholars 599), he is, as some modern critics call him, the most “religious” believer of ritual propriety in The Scholars.97 Wang’s third daughter is apparently his most faithful disciple. As the young widow kills herself in order to join her husband in the grave, Wang, while saddened, hails her suicide as a glorious deed that will enable her name “to be recorded in history” (RLWS 553; Scholars 601). Reprimanding his grief-stricken wife for being a “silly old woman,” Wang insists that their daughter has died a most proper death for a good timu. The Chinese word timu, in its rich polysemy, can mean “cause” as well as “topic” or “subject matter” for a textual composition. That semantic ambiguity is most meaningful here, as the daughter dies for a “good cause” which in turn becomes a “good topic” for books such as her father’s that preach ritual propriety. Wang Yuhui’s ethical conviction, in Shang Wei’s words, is “based on a simple maxim: Select a rubric for yourself so that others can write you into the sacred texts of history.”98 It is not coincidental that his books are completed about the same time as his daughter dies. It can be said that they are written in both the old licentiate’s ink and the young woman’s blood. The simultaneous death of a human life and birth of the new writings mark an astounding moment of the old scholar’s return to the world of texts.
The young widow’s death eventually wins recognition from the government. On an official decree, a shrine is made and a sacrificial ceremony conducted in her honor. Again, with the ritual properly practiced, Wang Yuhui’s thought turns to his writings, as he leaves home trying to find a printing firm for his manuscripts. On his way to visit a friend, Wang takes a tour of Suzhou, and, most interestingly, the narrative of his tour is remarkably similar to Ma Chunshang’s tour of West Lake in chapter 14. Like Ma, Wang’s sense of moral propriety is shaken while out sightseeing. While Ma Chunshang receives a moral “recharge” by kowtowing to the inscription of a past emperor, Wang Yuhui pays a visit to the Tai Bo temple to seek spiritual sustenance after his arrival in Nanjing. In the dust-covered text of the ritual program posted on the dilapidated wall, Wang Yuhui perhaps sees the future of his own ritual manuals before they are even in print: the moral contents of the writings will be subjected to oblivion and the texts will be reduced to mere empty words.

Again, the parallel between Wang Yuhui and Ma Chunshang, compilers of ritual manuals and bagu anthologies respectively, is part of a larger design to demonstrate the quandary for the literati. For all their endeavors to lift themselves out of a textual culture that is manipulated by political power and sullied by the avarice for rank and fame, they end up being ensnared even more deeply. Wang Yuhui may be a devoted advocate of ritual propriety, but in the final analysis, he is just another Ma Chunshang, offering new additions to an already congested realm of texts that is sealed off from the world of praxis. Not surprisingly, the participants of the Tai Bo ceremony disperse in different directions soon after the event. Several of them leave for official positions in Beijing, even Chi Hengshan, the principal organizer of the event. As ritual now retreats from real-life practice back to the form of textual dogma, it loses much of its moral efficacy.

A NEW GENERATION OF EDUCATED MEN

The experiment with li yue bing nong thus ends in failure. In their quest for an identity independent of the imperial state, the literati do not appear to be any more effective than Sun Wukong’s attempt to somersault out of the Buddha’s palm. The opening paragraph of chapter 55, for good reason, expresses a somber sense of futility and helplessness:
By the twenty-third year of the Wanli period, all the well-known scholars had disappeared from Nanjing. Of Dr. Yu’s generation, some were old, some had died, some had gone far away, and some had closed their doors and paid no attention to affairs outside. Pleasure haunts and taverns were no longer frequented by men of talent, and honest men no longer occupied themselves with ceremony or letters. As far as scholarship was concerned, all who passed the examinations were considered brilliant and all who failed fools. And as for liberality, the rich indulged on ostentatious gestures while the poor were forced to seem shabby. You might have the genius of Li Bai or Du Fu and the moral worth of Yan Hui or Zeng Shen, but no one would ask your advice. So at coming of age ceremonies, marriages, funerals or sacrifices in big families and in the halls of the local gentry, nothing was discussed but promotions, transfers and recalls in the official world. And all impecunious scholars did was to try by various tricks to find favor with the examiners. (RLWS 820; Scholars 676)

The struggle of Yu Yude, Du Shaoqing, and their friends has caused little change, as the values in the literati culture continue to be dictated by the imperial state with its ways of distributing rank and fame. Yet the quest for liberation from imperial servitude does not end. The four “extraordinary figures” (qiren) who make their debut at the very end of the novel herald a new phase in the evolution of the relationship between the state and the educated elite.

Each of these four men excels in one of the four accomplishments traditionally associated with literati cultural cultivation: zither (qin), chess (qi), calligraphy (shu), and painting (hua). Apparently, they are well educated and culturally cultivated, but they all refuse to “use written words as stepping-stones to fame and rank.” Instead, by taking up mundane occupations, they become true owners of their knowledge and skills and are able to live a simple but dignified life without having to curry to the whims of political authorities. From the very end of the novel they resonate with Wang Mian, with whom the novel begins. Indeed, they are the spiritual heirs of Wang Mian—who is portrayed in the novel more as a painter than a man of textual learning—and they are also successors to the failed cause of scholars of the older generation in Nanjing. Jing Yuan, a vocal tailor and skilled zitherist, may be taken as the spokesman of the quartet, and what he says in justifying his vocational commitment is strongly remi-
niscent of Du Shaoqing’s pronounced wish to “attend to my own affairs”: “I am not disgracing my studies by tailoring. Those college scholars don’t look at things the way we do. They would never be friends with us. As it is, I make six or seven silver cents a day; and when I’ve eaten my fill, if I want to strum my zither or do some writing, there’s nobody to stop me. I don’t want to be rich or noble, or to make up to any man. Isn’t it pleasant to be one’s own master like this?” (RLWS 628; Scholars 684). That these four men correspond neatly to the four arts in literati culture is obviously intended to be symbolic. Rather than taking them as individual hermits, it makes more sense to consider them representatives of a new generation of intellectuals that the novel invokes. With literacy overflowing the examinations into other cultural spheres, the social disparity between the educated elite and the common “townsfolk” (shijing ximin) was narrowing. For these newcomers, government office, the ultimate goal of a traditional scholar’s prolonged toil in textual studies, is no longer the only acceptable vocational choice. By steering away from textual learning, the traditional avenue to fame and prestige, they are less susceptible to political manipulation and at least one step closer to becoming their own masters, to echo Jing Yuan’s words. Meanwhile, as suggested by their proficiency in qin, qi, shu, and hua, which is clearly a synecdoche for their cultural competence, they make meaningful contributions to social growth and cultural enrichment. Thus these four “extraordinary figures” are truly the ones that “link the past with the future” (shuwang silai), as the opening couplet of the chapter has it.