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## Examining Narrative Form in *The Scholars*

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### Abstract

In Wu Jingzi's (吳敬梓) *The Scholars* (*Rulin waishi* 儒林外史), the narrative is constructed through the characters' descriptions of themselves as well as "character zones" reconciled within the dialogue, resulting in a distinctive narrative form. This article rationalizes inconsistencies in narrative time not as the product of false authorship but, rather, as the product of Wu Jingzi's narrative style. Furthermore, because these inconsistencies are found primarily in dialogue, solving the mystery of narrative time gives us an unparalleled opportunity to examine the novel's narrative form. Wu's writing style is perhaps best described as *laissez-faire*: weaving personal experiences together with anecdotes and rumors drawn from his social circle, he fashions a character-driven narrative form that mixes different perspectives and voices. More importantly, his narration illuminates the world of the Qing-era literati, reflecting the oral and written narrative cultures of the Confucian elite.

### Keywords

Chinese literature – narrative form – *The Scholars* – Wu Jingzi

Though set primarily in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), *The Scholars* (*Rulin waishi* 儒林外史) takes place during the period from the late Yuan (1271-1368) to the early Qing (1644-1911). Except for chapters 1 and 56, the core of the novel takes place over 110 years and the reigns of six successive Ming emperors: Chenghua (成化), Hongzhi (弘治), Zhengde (正德), Jiajing (嘉靖), Longqing (隆慶), and Wanli (萬曆). A close reading reveals that chapters 2 to 55 are

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largely a year-by-year recording of events, with temporal dislocations occurring in chapter 7 (eight years), chapter 25 (ten years), and chapters 54 and 55 (twenty years). In “Chronicling *The Scholars* (Ruilin waishi jili 儒林外史 [紀歷]),” Tan Fengliang (談鳳梁) offers a detailed analysis of the novel’s narrative time. He notes its subtle, painstaking complexity but also reports a number of errors and omissions. Some dates appear to be incorrect or do not conform to other details in the novel, while in other cases the narrative time is unclear, “insufficiently precise” or “seemingly unreliable.”<sup>1</sup> He notes nineteen such instances throughout the novel, although the majority is in the second half. Upon close examination, it is possible to identify further errors of a similar nature. Even if we disregard confusion stemming from unclear narration or dialogue, which are not considered here, we are left with at least ten such inaccuracies. Why is this so and how does it inform our interpretation of the novel?

Chronological inaccuracies instinctively raise the suspicion of false authorship, and this is the answer that many scholars have offered, but it cannot be the only possible answer. Resorting to false authorship cannot clarify why the narrator so rarely errs in his chronology of the chapters, nor can it explain why chronological inaccuracies appear more frequently in the second half of the novel. It is tempting to place the blame on a clumsy narrator or to expediently eliminate these passages, but this will not do. The novel is like a seventiered pagoda: remove one layer, and the whole pagoda comes tumbling down. And so presuming to verify the identity of the narrator or the authenticity of the text on the basis of lapses in narrative time remains untenable, with no clear evidence.<sup>2</sup>

Wu Jingzi’s inconsistencies in chronological narration are often the result of experimentation. For example, over the course of his more than twenty years of writing and editing, he increasingly drew on his contemporaries to serve as models for his characters, often transplanting their real-life time and circumstances into the existing framework of his novels; this leads to a number of contradictions and confusions in his chronology. Seen in this way, these fissures offer valuable insight into Wu’s creative process, its conflicting influences, multiple time dimensions, and the external forces motivating his loose style. Embarking on such investigations, we set aside questions of authorship and authenticity in order to examine the narrative time syndrome and diagnose its historical origins.

1 Tan Fengliang 談鳳梁, “Rulin waishi jili 儒林外史 [紀歷] (Chronicling *The Scholars*),” *Nanjing shifan daxue xuebao* 南京師範大學學報 3 (1984): 44-56.

2 I speak solely with regard to the chronology of *The Scholars*, and not the controversy surrounding the 1803 “Lying Idle Cottage” section.

In “A New Exploration of the Chronology and Process of Writing *The Scholars* (Rulin waishi chuanguo shijian, guocheng xintan 儒林外史>創作時間、過程新探),” Tan Fengliang raises several important points.<sup>3</sup> First, Wu began to write the novel around 1735, finishing a draft around 1748-1750, after which he began editing continuously. Second, the writing of the novel took place in two phases: chapters 1-25 were completed before February 1736, with chapters 21-25 being written in the two months after Wu returned to Nanjing from a trip to Yangzhou. Chapters 26-35 were written between 1736 and 1739. The final chapters of the novel were finished before Wu’s death.<sup>4</sup> Third, these phases represent an important shift in the sourcing of material: though the entire book is a work of fiction, chapters 1-25 most frequently employ historical anecdotes and cultural narratives, while chapters 26-35 draw on material from the author’s own life and those of his acquaintances. From chapter 36 onward, Wu continues to draw on biographical material but also inserts historical tales and cultural narratives. Fourth, the mixing of fiction and reality becomes most pronounced in the final third of the book.

There is reason to question the second point, as discussed below, but the other points are generally accurate. The last point is perhaps the most prescient. In the final third of the book, Wu deliberately attaches real people to the false events of the first and second sections, creating linkages between these different sections. From there arises the necessity of dealing with characters that appeared in previous sections; Wu employs both direct narration and flashbacks, but he often makes mistakes. The time span of the novel is longer than the lifespan of any human character, resulting in inevitable mix-ups and absurd plotlines: Ma Chunshang is still studying for the imperial examinations at the age of nearly 100, and Tang Zhentai’s brother Tang Feng turns 100 retiring to the countryside.<sup>5</sup>

Here some explanation is required. Wu Jingzi does not narrate the biographies of his characters directly; rather, these ages were deduced from details in the book, which hints at the nature of the problem. The stories of Ma Chunshang and Tang Feng were modeled after Wu’s acquaintances Feng Cui

3 Li Hanqiu 李漢秋, ed., *Rulin waishi yanjiu lunwenji* 〈儒林外史〉研究論文集 (A Collection of Critical Writings on *The Scholars*) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1987), 229-247.

4 There is some controversy regarding when Wu Jingzi wrote the various chapters of *The Scholars*. Hu Shi’s thesis that the novel was finished between 1748 and 1750 is widely accepted by scholars.

5 Tan Fengliang 談鳳梁, “Rulin waishi chuanguo shijian, guocheng xintan 〈儒林外史〉創作時間、過程新探 (A New Exploration of the Chronology and Process of Writing *The Scholars*),” in *Rulin waishi yanjiu lunwenji*, 243.

and Yang Kai.<sup>6</sup> As the time that Wu wrote the novel, both Feng and Yang were still alive, so in his mind's eye Ma and Tang were the same age or close to the same age as they were in real life. Wu continued to follow the lives of these real-life acquaintances and added new events into the novel as they transpired. Thus, the biographies of his fictional characters directly followed and were even dependent upon the lives of their real-life models. As he set out a chronological framework for his novel, Wu calculated the dates year by year, but occasional lapses still occurred, resulting in a chronological framework independent of the narrative framework of the novel and even occasionally in conflict with the narrative framework.

The collective efforts of multiple generations of scholars have resulted in a rich corpus of literature with regard to the characters, but we too often disregard the influence of the characters' real-life models and their own stories on narrative time. Although these real-life characters are combined with elements of fantasy, the narration of *The Scholars* is inextricably tied to the chronologies of their real-life biographies.

### Real-Life Models and the Problem of Narrative Time

In chapter 25, Xiang Ding calls on his old friend Bao Wenqing when passing through Nanjing. He tells him, "More than ten years have passed since we parted." Tan Fengliang places this event in the sixty-first year of the novel's chronology. Bao Wenqing and Xiang Ding's farewell in Andong County in chapter 24 would have occurred some ten years before that. This would mean that ten years had passed between chapters, a rarity in *The Scholars*. Tan Fengliang adds that the details of the narrative seem to suggest that only three or four years had passed since Bao and Xiang had met in Andong County and that the source of such inconsistencies is unclear. It is certainly difficult to reconcile: if only three or four years are accounted for in the narration, why would Xiang claim it had been over a decade since they last met?

According to He Zehan, Xiang Ding was inspired by Shang Pan (商盤) (1701-1767). Jiang Shiquan, Shang's biographer, writes that Shang was appointed county magistrate in 1730, became curator at the Eight Banners National Academy of History in 1736, counted Emperor Qianlong among his patrons,

6 For further details, see He Zehan 何澤翰, *Rulin waishi renwu benshi kaolue* 儒林外史人物本事考略 (*A Textual Analysis of Character Source Material*) (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1985), 12-15, 78-85.

and was bestowed with several titles, including regional governor of Haizhou. Emperor Qianlong even named him Commandery Aide of Zhenjiang.<sup>7</sup>

As Wu Jingzi described Xiang Ding's life, he must have had Shang Pan in mind, but he did not blindly follow the chronology of Shang's career. Instead, between chapters 23 and 25, he describes in summary form the twists and turns of his career, which in real life ended in 1744. This results in an inconsistency between Shang's self-description and Bao Wenqing's narrative. Wu must have become distracted by the chronology of Shang's life and thus deviated from his novel's chronology. Strangely, the problem could have easily been avoided: there seems to be no literary need for Wu to describe Xiang's career in such detail.

It is likely that Wu Jingzi wrote chapter 25 shortly after Shang Pan's career ended in 1744, so he included in the story events that had recently transpired in Shang's life, resulting in an excess span of time that seems to belong nowhere.

Another inconsistency in narrative time occurs in chapter 41. In April, Du Shaoqing chances upon his father's cousin Zhuang Zhuojiang while boating on the Qinhuai River. Zhuang Shaoguang introduces Du to Zhuang Zhuojiang, saying, "He has lived in Nanjing for eighty-nine years." But by examining the narrative closely, we find that Du has lived in Nanjing for only fifteen years by this point. This is a surprising error, considering that Du is modeled after Wu Jingzi himself. Other than a false author, what other plausible explanation could there be?

Zhuang Zhuojiang's character is partially modeled after Cheng Mengxing (1678-1755). In 1712 Cheng obtained the highest rank in the imperial examinations, joining the ranks of China's illustrious civil servants, and was awarded a position in the Hanlin Academy. In 1716, he went home to Yangzhou to mourn his mother's death and did not return to public life. In the novel, Zhuang Zhuojiang is Du Shaoqing's father's cousin, and, similarly, Cheng Mengxing is Wu Jingzi's father's cousin in real life. Zhuang even says to Du, "Forty years ago I had my last meal with a person I highly respect," which is in accordance with the date of Cheng's death.<sup>8</sup> It seems that Wu is exceptionally careful with regard to the chronology of his own family.

7 Jiang Shiquan 蔣士銓, "Baoyi xiansheng zhuan 寶意先生傳," in *Zhongya tangji jiaojian 忠雅堂集校箋*, ed. Shao Haiqing 邵海清校 (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1993), 4: 2093-2094. However, the characters and punctuation used here are not necessarily consistent with this cited work.

8 With regard to Cheng Mengxing's biography, see He, *Rulin waishi renwu benshi kaolüe*, 75-78. See also Wang Juanjuan 王娟娟, "Cheng Mengxing yanjiu 程夢星研究 (A Study of Cheng Mengxing)" (M.A. thesis, Anhui University, 2010), Appendix 1, "Cheng Mengxing

In April and May 1740, Wu traveled to Yangzhou and then stopped to visit his hometown, Quanjiao. While Wu was in Yangzhou, the Huainan-Huaibei salt controller Lu Jianzeng was falsely accused of bribery, removed from his post, and exiled to a garrison on the border of the Qing empire. Gao Fenghan, along with other friends, went to see him off and gave him a copy of a painting that he had painted. In the lower-right-hand part of the painting was inscribed a poem about a duke crossing the border, and inscribed on the silk borders of the painting were over twenty lines of poetry by Zheng Xie, Li Mian, Cheng Mengxing, and others.<sup>9</sup> According to existing historical records, Wu's first meeting with Cheng occurred around this time. Zhuang Shaogang's comment that Du Shaoxing had lived in Nanjing for eighty-nine years could be a reflection of a comment made by one of Cheng's friends upon Wu's first meeting with Cheng, because by the spring of 1740 Wu had already lived in Nanjing for over seven years. Perhaps when Wu described Du meeting his father's cousin on the Huai River, Wu had in mind his own meeting with the real-life Zhuang Zhuojiang, that is, Cheng, whom he met in Yangzhou. This is one possible explanation for the inconsistency.

Similar situations occur a number of times in the novel: in chapter 49, Wu Shu says, "Four or five years ago, Mr. Du Shaoqing compiled a commentary on the *Book of Songs* that drew quite a bit of attention in his social circles." This "four or five years" does not fit the narrative time of the novel. In chapter 34, Chi Hengshan comments on the verse to Du Shaoqing: "The other day you gave me a copy of your *Commentary on the Book of Songs*, which I admired immensely." Chapter 35 describes Zhuang Shaogang's life at Xuanwu Lake: "When at leisure, he would fill to the brim another jar of wine and call his wife to come sit by his side to read Du Shaoqing's *Commentaries on the Book of Songs*." From chapter 34 to chapter 49, at least nineteen years passed—significantly more than the "four or five years" recalled by Wu Shu.

Wu Jingzi himself also wrote a *Commentary on the Book of Songs*.<sup>10</sup> But the question of when Wu wrote the book, and when he began to circulate it in

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yu *Rulin waishi*—Cheng Mengxing wei zhuangzhuojiang renwu yuanxing buzheng 程夢星與《儒林外史》—程夢星為莊濯江人物原型補正 (Cheng Mengxing and *The Scholars—A Revision to the Theory of Cheng Mengxing's Real-Life Model as a Resident of Zhuangzhuojiang*), 47-52; Appendix 2, "Cheng Mengxing nianpu 程夢星年譜 (Chronology of Cheng Mengxing)."

- 9 For further details, see Chen Meilin 陳美林, "Wu Jingzi Shengping 吳敬梓生平 (Biography of Wu Jingzi)," in *Wu Jingzi pingzhuan 吳敬梓評傳 (A Critical Biography of Wu Jingzi)* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1990), 339-344.
- 10 See Zhou Xinglu 周興陸, "Wu Jingzi shichuan zhuzuo *Shishuo* zai Shanghai faxian 吳敬梓失傳著作《詩說》在上海發現 (Wu Jingzi's Lost *Commentary on Book of Songs*

literary circles, has not been definitely resolved.<sup>11</sup> However, *The Scholars* does give us a comparative timeframe: by the time Wu had written chapter 49, his *Commentary on the Book of Songs* had already been circulating for four to five years. Therefore, he consciously or unconsciously adopted his own life's chronology in the novel's narrative time, again creating a number of inconsistencies.<sup>12</sup>

Another equally improbable error in the novel occurs in chapter 46: Yu Yude says to Du Shaoxing, "I used to be a poor scholar, but during the six or seven years that I've been in Nanjing I've saved enough to buy a paddy field producing thirty bushels a year." But the events of the novel suggest that Yu had been in Nanjing for at least fifteen years. Yu's real-life counterpart is Wu Peiyuan, also a poor scholar. From 1738 to 1746 Wu worked as a tutor in Shangyuan County while preparing for the imperial examinations, and in the fall of 1746 he went to Nanjing. Wu Jingzi and other acquaintances gave him a farewell dinner.<sup>13</sup>

I propose that these types of errors emerged because Wu Jingzi was too faithful to Yu Yude's biography. No other narrator could have been so intimately acquainted with the lives of Wu's acquaintances upon whom his characters were modeled. Therefore, although such examples have been used to call

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Discovered in Shanghai)," *Guangming Daily* (Beijing), June 24, 1999; Zhou Xinglu, "Wu Jingzi shishuo jiehou fucun 吳敬梓〈詩說〉劫後複存 (Reconstructing Wu Jingzi's *Commentary on the Book of Songs*)," *Fudan daxue xuebao* 復旦大學學報 5 (1999): 131-140.

- 11 For other views, see Zhou Xinglu 周興陸 and Jin Zaimin 金宰民, "Wenmu shanfang shishuo santi 文木山房詩說三題," *Mingqing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究 (*Research on Ming-Qing Era Novels*) 2 (2001). See also Li Zhongming 李忠明 and Wu Bo 吳波, "Wenmu shanfang shishuode faxian yu yanjiu 〈文木山房詩說〉的發現與研究 (Discovery and Critical Studies of the *Wenmu Mountain Commentary on Book of Songs*)," in *Rulin waishi yanjiushi* 儒林外史研究史 (*A History of Critical Studies of The Scholars*), ed. Chen Meilin 陳美林 (Fuzhou: Haixia wenyi chubanshe, 2006), 281-294.
- 12 We can also infer the following: In chapter 34 of *The Scholars* Wu Jingzi's book of verse was circulating among his friends, implying that the chapter was written not long after this event. Chapter 49 mentions that the book was published four or five years earlier, providing another reference point. These four or five years could well represent the time that passed between chapters 34 and 49. This shows that, as the author was creating his characters, he did not necessarily always rely on their life chronologies but, rather, in the process of writing, he tended to insert events that had recently happened in the story. In this way, a relationship developed between his private life and the narration of the novel. This phenomenon does not occur often in the novel, but it is especially important in researching character development.
- 13 He, *Rulin waishi renwu benshi kaolüe*, 42-51.



Wu's authorship into question, ironically these details prove that only he could have written these passages, because only he could make such mistakes.<sup>14</sup>

### Real-Life Models, Narrative Time, and the Writing Process

In light of this conclusion, there is reason to pose the following question: Can we deduce when parts of the novel were written, based on the timing of real-life events that were included in the novel? As described above, the section of chapter 25 in which Wu Jingzi traces Xiang Ding's official career was inspired by the career of Shang Pan, which ended in 1744. We can deduce, then, that chapter 25 was written in 1744 or shortly afterward.

In order to make our argument more convincing, we turn to the second half of the novel. As the novel progresses, it relies more and more on real-life models for its characters, and so narrative time begins to approximate real-life time more and more closely. This section is based on the experiences of the author after he moved to Nanjing. From chapters 31 to 46, Nanjing becomes the geographic focus of the narration, and so a new group of characters tied together by Yu Yude comes to the forefront. Yu was the master of sacrifice for a ritual ceremony at the temple of the sage Taibo. The ritual is a central element in chapter 37, as it is attended by all the prominent scholars living nearby. Yu officially makes his debut in this chapter. In chapter 46 he leaves Nanjing, fading into the background of the story.

As discussed above, Yu Yude's real-life model, Wu Peiyuan, was a tutor and imperial examination candidate in Nanjing between 1738 and 1746 (the county government was located in Nanjing). In the late fall of 1746, he went to Beijing to sit for the imperial examinations; in 1747 he was sent to Yuyao County to serve as county magistrate, and the following year was transferred to Sui'an County. In 1752 he retired from public life and returned to his hometown, Wuxi. Therefore, chapter 36 could not have been written before 1738. Considering the relative completeness of the plot of chapters 31-36, which revolves around the Taibo ritual, an even more conservative estimate is that this section was written in 1746 or shortly afterward, because this would have given Wu the opportunity to formulate a complete plotline before sitting down to write.

14 See Shang Wei 商偉, *Li yu shiba shiji de wenhua zhuanzhe: Rulin waishi yanjiu* 禮與十八世紀的文化轉折：儒林外史研究 (*Li and Eighteenth-Century Cultural Transformations: Studies of The Scholars*), Appendix: "Rulin waishi de zuozhe, banben jiqi xiangguan wenti 《儒林外史》的作者、版本及其相關問題 (Author, Editions and Other Issues of *The Scholars*)" (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2012), 419-420.



Additionally, in chapter 48, Yu writes, “Dr. Yu had been transferred to Zhejiang, Du Shaoping had gone to pay him a visit; Zhuang Zhengjun had gone home to repair his ancestral tombs, and Chi Hengshan and Wu Zhengzi had left for an official post in distant parts.” In chapter 49 Wu writes of Chi Hengshan, “He left in the middle of the night for Jurong to see to the repairs to the imperial academy.” To verify, Du Shaoping’s real-life model, Wu Jingzi himself, did in fact go to Sui’an between 1748 and 1749 to pay his respects to Wu Peiyuan, who had recently become county magistrate.

Chi Hengshan’s real-life model was Fan Mingzheng, who was originally from Jurong. According to later Jurong County records, Fan Mingzheng returned to his hometown in 1749 to compile the earlier county records. Similarly, in *The Scholars*, Chi Hengshan went home to “make repairs to the imperial academy” in 1749.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, chapters 48 and 49 about Chi must have been written not long after 1749, less than five years before Wu Jingzi’s death.<sup>16</sup>

There are a few additional examples that can serve as ancillary evidence: chapters 40 and 41, which deal with the character Shen Qiongzhi, are based in part on a case adjudicated by Yuan Mei during his tenure as a government official in Jiangning.<sup>17</sup> However, Yuan Mei was transferred to Jiangning in 1745 and retired in 1749, so this section could not have been written before that. Additionally, at Yu Yude’s farewell dinner in chapter 46, Tang Zhentai says to Du Shaoping: “Has your worthy cousin joined the ministry yet?” Du answered in the affirmative: “He has.” Here “worthy cousin” refers to Du, who in chapter 31 had already told Bao Tingxi that he was set to enter the civil service at the highest rank within the next year or two. The background has already been established, so Du’s joining the ministry comes as a matter of course. But let us not forget that this detail comes from the biography of Du’s real-life model, Wu Qing, who in 1745 scored highly on the imperial examinations and became Director of the Ministry of Punishments.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, chapter 46 could only have been written after 1745.

15 “Characters,” in *Xuzuan jurong xianzhi* 續纂句容縣誌 (*Compilation of Jurong County Annals*) (1930), Guangxu jiachen chongkanben 光緒甲辰重刊本, 9: 3. For details on the biography of Fan Mingzheng, see He, *Rulin waishi renwu benshi kaolüe*, 38-40.

16 Tan, “Rulin waishi chuanguo shijian, guocheng xintan,” 241-242.

17 Yuan Mei 袁枚, *Sui-Yuan shihua* 隨園詩話 (Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House, 1960), 4: 115.

18 Zhu Baojiong 朱保炯 and Xie Peilin 謝沛霖, ed., *Ming-Qing jinshi timing beilu suoyin* 明清進士題名碑錄索引 (*Index of Ming-Qing Era Palace Graduate Autograph Steles*) (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1980), 2715.

What, then, should be said of the earlier chapters of *The Scholars*? Here we consider a passage from chapter 28:

Ji Weixiao said: "As soon as I came to Yangzhou, Inspector Xun gave me 120 taels, and put me in charge of the customs duties. I shall probably be here for some years, so I've taken another wife."

In chapter 30, Bao Tingxi tells Du Shenqing that Xun gave Ji several hundred taels, and that Ji married into one of the prominent families of Yangzhou. According to He Zehan's research, Ji Weixiao is based on Li Mian (李勉) and the salt controller Xun Mei is based on the life of Lu Jianzeng (盧見曾), who became salt controller in 1736, according to records of the Huainan-Huaibei salt trade.<sup>19</sup> It is known that Li Mian received financial help from Lu Jianzeng, but the time frame is not clear.<sup>20</sup> According to Lu Wenchao (盧文弨), Lu Jianzeng simultaneously served as both salt controller and Superintendent of Yangzhou Customs.<sup>21</sup> Three years later, he was convicted of bribery and exiled to the Qing garrison lands, as mentioned above. Because of this, the interaction between Salt Controller Xun and Li Weixiao must have occurred between 1736 and 1739, so Wu Jingzi could not have written chapter 28 before this period. In fact, Xun was salt controller as early as chapter 22, so that chapter must have also been written after 1736. These details support my conclusion: chapter 25 could not have been written before February 1736, as Tan Fengliang argues. In addition, chapter 29, which details Xun's bribery charges, must have been written after 1739.

In conclusion, I believe chapter 31 was written slightly later than is generally believed by scholars, because chapter 22 was likely not written before 1736. I have placed the beginning of chapter 25 in 1744, but this claim requires further evidence. Additionally, chapter 49 could not have been written earlier than 1749. Therefore, the last part of the novel must have been written shortly after the events upon which it was based.

19 He, *Rulin waishi renwu benshi kaolüe*, 23-30.

20 Zhao Shenzhen 趙慎畛, "Yuchao zazhi 榆巢雜識," in *Qingdai shiliao biji congkan* 清代史料筆記叢刊 (*Qing Dynasty Sketches of Historical Material*), ed. Xu Huaibao 徐懷寶點校 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2001), 1: 30.

21 "Zhiguanmen minghuanzhuan 職官門 • 名宦傳," in *Lianghuai yan fazhi* 兩淮鹽法志 (Legal Records of the Huainan-Huaibei Salt Trade), ed. Wang Anding 王安定 (1905), 137: 30; Min Erchang 閔爾昌, ed., "Bei zhuan ji bu 碑傳集補," in *Qingdai zhuanji congkan* 清代傳記叢刊 (*A Collection of Qing Dynasty Biographies*), comp. Zhou Junfu 周駿富 (Taipei: Mingwen Bookstore, 1985), 121: 107-113.

### Additions and Revisions: The Example of Ma Chunshang

The process of reconstructing the chronology of Wu Jingzi's writing process shows that he often includes updates or revisions to the biographies of his characters. Generally, this occurs in one of two ways. First, the author is so intimately acquainted with the details of the lives of the acquaintances upon which his characters are based that he takes the opportunity to periodically update the reader on their lives even after they have faded into the background of the novel. Chapter 46 and its treatment of Du Shenqing's government post is an example of this that is analyzed above. The second possibility is that Wu has added to or revised previously written portions, and it is this circumstance that we discuss in detail here. The distinction between these two situations is not always clear cut. If Wu Jingzi had already written chapter 46 by 1745, then Du's update must have been a later addition. Therefore, the distinction between additions and revisions necessarily depends upon our own chronological estimates.

At times, these updates and revisions simply add new information or provide updates on the lives of characters, reminding the reader that they continue to live out their lives in the background of the novel and have not disappeared simply because they are no longer the focus of the narrative. But there are a few instances in which these additions or revisions dramatically alter the fates of characters, emphasizing the latent potential for transformation in Wu Jingzi's loose creative process. These hidden storylines in the background of the second half of the novel are often quasi-flashbacks: they remind the reader of a past episode while providing a new outlook on the event. In this way, past events are brought back into focus and often tied to current controversies or subjected to lively debate. This refusal to place characters and events safely in the unchanging and suspenseless past is a unique characteristic of Wu's narrative style.

Ma Chunshang is an excellent example. He makes his debut in chapter 13. In chapter 17, Kuang Chaoren returns to Hangzhou from his hometown and asks for Ma, upon which he is told that Ma has already returned to Chuzhou. At this point, Ma fades into the background of the story. What is interesting is that Ma's role in the story in fact begins in earnest at this point. His name appears in the gossip of the literati, drawing him into a new wave of controversy only after he has left the spotlight. This is Ma's "after story," and it serves to make Ma more interesting in his absence than in his presence.

These comments are found in chapters 17, 18, 20, 49, and 52 of the novel. Due to space constraints, we analyze the following example from chapter 49:

“Sir, I have a friend in your honorable province, a Chuzhou native. I wonder if you know him.” Chi Hengshan said to Wan Zhongshu.

Wan Zhongshu replied, “Ma Chunshang is the most well-known scholar in Chuzhou. I have a few other scholar friends there, but I don’t know which one you mean.”

“I was speaking of Mr. Ma,” Chi said.

Wan Zhongshu said: “Ma Chunshang is my sworn brother: of course I know him. He has gone to Beijing now. He is sure to go far there.”

“Why has he gone to Beijing?” asked Wu Shu quickly. “He has not yet passed the provincial examination.”

Wan Zhongshu replied: “When the last provincial director of education completed his three years in office, he recommended Ma for his excellent conduct. He has gone to the capital now to take a shortcut to officialdom. That’s why I say he will go far.”

Shi Yushi interjected: “These unorthodox careers won’t take one very far. Men of character stick to the official channels.”

“During his visit last year,” said Chi Hengshan, “I was struck by Ma’s genuine knowledge of his subject. It is strange that after all these years he is still a licentiate. It looks as if the examination system is not infallible after all.”

“You are wrong there, Mr. Chi,” protested Gao Hanlin. “Our dynasty has relied on these examinations for the past two hundred years. True scholars will always succeed. Mr. Ma’s writings on this subject are merely superficial; of the finer points he knows absolutely nothing. If he were a licentiate for three hundred years and came first in two hundred local tests, he would still fail every time in the prefectural examinations!”

“Do you mean to say,” asked Wu, “that the examiners and the provincial director of education don’t see eye to eye?”

“Certainly!” answered Gao. “All the students who rank high on the provincial list will fail in the real examinations. Possessing a wholehearted dedication and doing well in the provincial examinations aren’t enough to guarantee success.”

“That essay of yours, sir, which won the first place,” said Wan, “has been carefully studied by everyone in our province.”

“Careful study,” responded Gao, “is the key to success. In my three essays for the district examination, not a single phrase was written at random; each was culled from the classics, and that is why I passed. Without careful study, even Confucius himself would not pass. Mr. Ma has been expounding essays all these years; but what he teaches simply cannot

pass muster. If he understood the meaning of careful study he would be a high official!"

"Your words are a guide to the young, sir," answered Wan. "But I still consider my friend Ma Chunshang a fine scholar. I saw his edition of *The Spring and Autumn Annals* in a friend's house in Yangzhou, and I thought he had done a very good job of it."

This scene is very well written: the opinions expressed by the interlocutors reveal a good deal about their own characters as well as other important details of the story. Through Wan Zhongshu, for example, we learn of Ma's ambitions in Beijing. This episode is based on the experience of Ma Suizhong, Ma Chunshang's real-life model, who went to Beijing in 1752 to pursue a career in officialdom. In terms of how this relates to the creation timeline of *The Scholars* itself, there are two possibilities. The first is that, as Wu Jingzi was writing chapter 49, he learned of the episode and included it in his novel. The second is that perhaps the novel was all but finished by 1752, and Wu Jingzi, upon hearing the news of Ma Suizhong, went back and added it to Ma Chunshang's story.<sup>22</sup> This seems to be the more plausible explanation. More importantly, this news gives Wu an opportunity to showcase his narrative talent, using this brilliant dialogue to draw the reader into the controversy surrounding Ma while expanding on and widening the reader's perception of Ma's character.

At the same time, one should not exaggerate the proportion of the novel subject to additions or revisions. Given the writing tools at Ma's disposal, systemic revision would have been extremely difficult; major changes would have affected the entire novel and made it nearly impossible to sort out all the details. Furthermore, extant copies of drafts penned by Wu contain no evidence that Wu had ever carried out any sort of systemic revisions.

In chapter 46, Li Weixiao pays a visit to Yu Huaxuan and Li Gong in which he mentions Xun Mei. However, Wu offers no biographical updates, and no mention is made of Xun's predicament in chapter 29. The reason, as one might imagine, is related to Xun's real-life model, Lu Jianzeng. Lu allegedly engaged in bribery in 1739 and was exiled the following year; just two years later, he was called back to take up a post in Luanzhou. Perhaps it was because of Lu's rapid

22 However, Wu Jingzi's additions were carefully chosen. In the year that Ma Suizhong went to Beijing, he in fact died in the capital, inspiring many of Wu Jingzi's friends to write poetry eulogizing him, but this is not mentioned in the novel. See He, *Ruilin waishi renwu benshi kaolie*, 14-15.

rehabilitation that the episode did not weigh heavily on Wu, and he never returned to the story of Xun. Nonetheless, the biographies of the characters' real-life models exert a marked, if perhaps at times subconscious, influence throughout the novel.

### Rumor Networks and Narrative Form in *The Scholars*

Above, we used narrative time in *The Scholars* as a starting point for our analysis, both verifying the authorship of Wu Jingzi and attempting to reconstruct his narrative process. We sought to understand the implications of his loose writing style and his tendency to draw on real-life acquaintances as a source of narrative material. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he wrote the first modern Chinese novel and, in doing so, was a pioneer in Chinese literary history.

Importantly, Wu Jingzi's writing style and process directly influenced the dialogue-centered narrative form of *The Scholars*. The majority of narrative inconsistencies occur in the dialogue, and, as discussed above, many of these dialogues were based on conversations that Wu observed or took part in. The narrative itself is relatively consistent, despite the fact that it is often contradicted by inconsistencies in the dialogue. Furthermore, once narrative time is introduced to the discussion of narrative form, these so-called chronological inconsistencies become relatively unimportant questions, since the characters are not narrators. It is important to avoid equating the dialogue with the narrative voice. This raises a crucial point: how should we understand the dialogue within the framework of Wu Jingzi's narration? How do we isolate its defining characteristics, its motivations, and its importance for the larger trajectory of the history of the Chinese novel?

We begin with a concrete example. Quan Wuyong is one of the novel's more memorable characters. He is enigmatic, difficult to categorize, and inspires perhaps more controversy than any other character. At the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12, Yang Zhizhong speaks highly of Quan, calling him a "remarkable genius and a wonderful scholar" and "unrivaled among contemporaries." However, later narration is more temperate in its praise of Quan, with opinions varying widely. In chapter 13, Quan's image receives a surprising makeover: at a feast at the estate of Lou Feng, Quan is arrested by government officials from Wucheng County and Xiaoshan County. He is accused of kidnapping and seducing a nun, Xin Yuan, from the Lan Ruo Temple. Quan is not heard from again until chapter 54:

"I heard that Mr. Quan Wuyong got into trouble later," said Chen Heshang. "What happened in the end?"

"He was slandered by some licentiates at his college," said Chen Munan. "Later he was cleared of that charge."

This is presented as idle chit-chat, yet it seems to subvert previous narrative elements and shakes the reader's understanding of Quan Wuyong. Why would the Quan Wuyong case be nonchalantly unearthed forty years after the fact?

Quan Wuyong is modeled after Shi Jing (是鏡) (1693-1769), a native of Wujin in Jiangsu Province.<sup>23</sup> The author Ruan Kuisheng (阮葵生) (1727-1789) describes Shi Jing in "Tea Guests' Remarks (Chayu kehua 茶餘客話)": "Native of Jiangyang, surname Shi, given name Jing, an arrogant individual lacking in culture. Enjoys boasting and complimenting himself. Never questions whether he is deserving of his status in life. Some years later, some accusations were leveled against him by local villagers and he fled into exile, not knowing what would become of him."<sup>24</sup> (For more detail on the episode, see Dong Chao). According to postscripts written by the author's son, Ruan Zhongqi, the 30-volume "Tea Guests' Remarks" was written before 1771. Shi Jing's name, which means "mirror," is believed to symbolize the accusations by the local villagers (see Dong). In the second volume, Shi Jing changes his name and becomes a scholar, building a house on Shengke Mountain and gathering 100 disciples.<sup>25</sup>

"East Marsh Prose (Dong gao za chao 東皋雜鈔)" is another source of information about Shi Jing. According to Dong Chao's 1753 preface, "East Marsh Prose" was compiled beginning "after the yellowing of the roses" and was finished in December, over three months later, so it contains contemporary stories about Shi Jing from that period.<sup>26</sup>

"The Chronicle of Mr. Shi Jing from Shun Mountain (Shunshan Shi Zhongming xiansheng nianpu 舜山是仲明先生年譜)," by Zhang Jingli (張敬立), attempts to refute the accusations surrounding Shi Jing.<sup>27</sup> The

23 Jin He 金和, "Rulin waishi ba 儒林外史跋 (A Postscript to *The Scholars*)." For further details, see He, *Rulin waishi renwu benshi kaolüe*, 1-12.

24 Ruan Kuisheng 阮葵生, "Chayu kehua 茶餘客話 (Tea Guests' Remarks)," in *Yi hai zhu chen 藝海珠塵*, Tingyitang edition 聽彝堂藏板, comp. Wu Shenglan 吳省蘭, 12, 8: 5-6.

25 "Dong gao za chao 東皋雜鈔 (East Marsh Prose)," in *ibid.*, 2: 13.

26 *Ibid.*, 1: 1-2.

27 Zhang Jingli, "Shunshan Shi Zhongming xiansheng nianpu 舜山是仲明先生年譜 (Chronicle of Mr. Shi Zhongming from Shun Mountain)" (1888), Wooden Movable Type Edition, in *Qingren nianpu xilie 清人年譜系列 (Qing Dynasty Biographical Dictionary)*, 2 *Qianjia mingru nianpu 乾嘉名儒年譜*, comp. Chen Zuwu 陳祖武選 (Beijing: Beijing Library Press, 2006), 488.



chronicle, which includes Liu Yin's biography of Shi, includes the following events: After the death of his father, the scholar Mu Lu, Shi speaks at his gravesite. Chen Shiguan retires from his post and returns south to call on his friends. Brother Li does not listen to Shi Jing's advice and continues to stir up trouble. Under duress from the Manchu county magistrate Sheng Bao, he falsely accuses Shi. The "Chronicle" places this episode in the fifty-ninth year of the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1720).<sup>28</sup> Again referring to the "Chronicle," Chen Shiguan's visit to Shi would have taken place in 1749, and the episode of the county magistrates in 1754.<sup>29</sup>

In "East Marsh Prose," Dong Chao writes that Shi Jing felt as though he had been betrayed by a close sworn brother. He added this comment not long after November 1753.

Later on, Shi Jing was the target of a lawsuit, but he managed to have the charges dropped. These events occurred between 1753 and 1754, most likely in 1754. Wu Jingzi died on October 28, 1754. At the time he was visiting old friends in Yangzhou, and on that day he had a pleasant discussion with Wang You. That night, he died suddenly.<sup>30</sup> Is there a connection, then, between Shi Jing and Quan Wuyong?

He Zehan supports Jin He's conclusion that the character Quan Wuyong is based on Shi Jing.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, he believes that chapter 13 implies that Shi Jing was falsely accused by one of his sworn brothers. The Qing-era scholar Zhang Wenhui also supports this view.<sup>32</sup> However, at the time that He Zehan developed this view, it was not yet clear that Shi Jing was accused of a crime that occurred in 1754, the year that Wu Jingzi died. This makes the connection seem implausible, as Wu could not have written chapter 13 in the last year of his life. Was Quan Wuyong's arrest a later revision?

Because of the episodic structure of the novel, if Wu Jingzi had made late additions to chapter 54, it would have had little effect on the rest of the story. However, it is difficult to reach any definite conclusion regarding the addition of Quan Wuyong's arrest in chapter 13. Certainly, the narrative required such

28 Ibid., 506.

29 Ibid., 610-611.

30 Wang Youzeng 王又曾, "Shu Wuzheng jun minxuan xiansheng (Wenmushanfang Shiji) Hou Youxu 书吴征君敏軒先生〈文木山房詩集〉後有序," in *Rulin waishi yanjiu ziliao* 儒林外史研究資料 (*Studies on The Scholars*), ed. Li Hanqiu 李漢秋 (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1984), 16-18.

31 He, *Rulin waishi renwu benshi kaolue*, 10.

32 Li Hanqiu 李漢秋, ed., *Rulin waishi huijiao huiping ben* 儒林外史匯校匯評本 (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1984), 185.

a scene in order to divulge the news of Quan's arrest, and what better scene than a feast, which, after having accomplished its purpose, can quietly disappear? Here I would like to encourage debate regarding He's conclusion and his implicit question: How did Wu manage to successfully weave a variety of descriptions and anecdotes regarding Quan into the novel? This is a seemingly more interesting question.

The "corrections" to chapter 54 were motivated by a controversy over a collection of poems. In chapter 54, Chen Suyuan pretends to become a monk in order to divorce his wife. He cuts his hair into the style of a monk and spends his days telling fortunes and reading poetry. One day he meets Ding Yanzhi, who has a collection of poems that he purchased a few days before. Ding insists that the poems were written at the Oriole-Throat Lake feast. Although the feast is described in chapter 12, none of the authors of the collection of poems—Lan Jiang, Zhao Xueqi, Kuang Chaoren, and so forth—made any appearance at the feast. Chen refuses to believe that the poems were written at the feast. Eventually, Chen Munan comes upon the two of them and settles their argument, confirming that neither Yang Zhizhong nor Quan Wuyong were famous for their poetry. It is this dialogue that leads to the question: "I heard that Mr. Quan Wuyong got into trouble later. What happened in the end?"

It is important to recognize that the controversy occurs in a passage of quoted dialogue rather than in the narration directly. In this way, it mirrors the information dissemination network of the literati. The network included word-of-mouth gossip as well as various forms of written communications, such as "East Marsh Prose" and "Tea Guests' Remarks," which describe the Shi Jing scandal: all of these originate from the same place and time. Shi was still alive at the time, which inevitably led to revisions and additions in various written accounts. *The Scholars* is no exception: using dialogue as a narrative form, Wu is inevitably drawn into the information networks of the literati. Neither Ding Yangzhi's comments nor Dong Chao's records necessarily represent the truth; in fact, they inevitably contain assertions and cases of mistaken identity. Both narrators and commentators will also inevitably have their own prejudices and judgments. Shi was a controversial character to begin with, and after he became involved in a lawsuit, the gossip and criticism naturally intensified.<sup>33</sup>

33 Due to space constraints, this article cannot provide a comprehensive treatment of the rumors surrounding Shi Jing. Considering the time limitations, Wu Jingzi likely had not read all the written comments and stories. Still, Shi was intimately acquainted with the Confucian elite of the period. He had acquired a reputation and was not uncontroversial. Regarding the rumors, of course, only hints and traces survive to this day. For example,

The novel has its foundations in this very information dissemination network. Eventually, through flashbacks, this phenomenon itself becomes a narrative object, occasionally even interfering in or correcting the narrative process. This is part of Wu Jingzi's narration style. It is not difficult to imagine his emotions upon hearing that Shi Jing had been wrongly accused and subsequently acquitted and to imagine him choosing to add this information into the narrative. As an author, he felt a responsibility not only toward his characters but also toward their real-life models, especially those who, like Shi Jing, were well-known. Contemporary Nanjing literary circles may well have recognized Shi in the novel. But Wu does not impose his views; instead, he lets the characters speak for themselves. This is one of the advantages of character-focused narration. It does not imply that Quan Wuyong's "rehabilitation" is justified or that he was wrongly accused. He is neither a criminal nor a gentleman. Quan the character is forged from the opinions of others, and it is only on the basis of these opinions that we can attempt to evaluate him.

### Conclusion

The character-driven narrative form of *The Scholars* brings to mind M.M. Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and the polyphonic novel. In "The Dialogic Imagination" and other writings, he emphasizes that one of the core features of the novel is the inclusion of dialogue in the narrative and the formation of "character zones" with this dialogue as a foundation.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, this marginalizes the authority of the narrator but, on the other, it creates a new consciousness centered on characters and discourse and their complex interrelationships. This relationship between characters and discourse is reflected in many aspects of discourse consciousness—language, style, irony, parody, dialogue, misappropriated dialogue, and more. Thus, according to Bakhtin, discourse consciousness is a characteristic feature of long novels; indeed it is

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Yuan Mei had heard that after Shi's father passed away, he spoke at his gravesite. Yuan Mei wrote a letter to Shi denouncing what he viewed as his affectation; he claimed that Shi was taking advantage of a death to create a reputation for himself. Dai Zhenzeng penned a response to this letter, "Yu Shi Jing lunxueshu," but later joined in satirizing Shi Jing's character and scholarly achievement. (For further details, see He, *Rulin waishi renwu benshi kaolüe*, 1-12.)

34 See M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 259-422. See also *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

possible only in long novels. Bakhtin's theory of the novel is based on the philosophy of language, which is clearly outside the scope of this article, but the similarities between his understanding of the long novel and the structure of *The Scholars* are hardly coincidental.

As an episodic novel, *The Scholars* shakes off the typical clichés of the novel form and undermines the power of the omniscient and unseen narrator whose authority traditionally went unchallenged. It should be noted that the proportion of dialogue to narrative text in *The Scholars* was much higher than that of the European novels with which Bakhtin was familiar.<sup>35</sup> Because of this, *The Scholars* is more effective in its character description.

It is also important to note that Wu Jingzi's characters' dialogue does not merge into a monolithic narrative voice. Further, the dialogue is more than just an indirect means for the narrator to exert control over the novel. Rather, Wu employs dialogue to mix different voices into the narrative, creating a heterogeneous narrator. Inconsistencies in narrative time construct this diverse, heterogeneous, character-centric narrative form.

Wu also employs dialogue as a means of rejecting the authority of the narrator. Instead, these diverse voices are seamlessly integrated into a heterogeneous narrative framework. Despite using a chronology situated within the history of the Ming dynasty, Wu still employs narration to denote the passage of time and seasons (e.g., he announces in chapter 35 "the first day of the month of October in the thirty-fifth year of the reign of Emperor Jiajing" and then "in the blink of an eye a year passed, and it was the middle of February").

When inconsistencies in narrative time appear, they are often the result of a discrepancy between the accounts of two characters or even the failure of scholars to agree on the dates of events. The inconsistency with regard to the details of the above-mentioned interaction between Xiang Ding and Bao Tingxi was a result of discrepancies in the biographies of the two characters. I tend to place the blame on Xiang Ding, because his account results in an odd gap between chapters 24 and 25. With regard to the novel as a whole, these discrepancies are the result of Wu Jingzi's character-centric narrative form. The novel never creates a coherent "reality" independent of the inner lives of its characters. In searching for truth, the reader is left to draw his or her own conclusions based on the characters' own accounts and a series of endless retellings and ambiguities.

From the perspective of Chinese literary history, the narrative form embodied by *The Scholars* can be traced back to the early seventeenth-century vernacular novel *The Golden Lotus* (*Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅), in which dialogue plays

35 See Shang, *Li yu shiba shiji de wenhua zhuanzhe*, 234-265.

a decisive role. In *The Golden Lotus*, it would not be a stretch to say that characters live out their lives “in” character dialogue: their identities as characters are shaped by dialogue. In many ways, dialogue is the basic building block of narration. What is interesting is that many events, when retold from the perspective of one character or another, seem to change or become distorted, giving rise to a number of ambiguities. Information dissemination networks even spring up around several of the main characters. Other characters are keen to play the role of messenger, adding their perspectives to dialogues and especially quarrels that have already played out, in the process creating a heterogeneous discourse containing multiple voices. They are quick to conjecture, exaggerate, or indulge in gossip and do not hesitate to create a scandal out of thin air. It is nearly impossible to verify the truth of many of their statements, but this is practically irrelevant. This is one of the defining characteristics of the dialogue-centric narrative form.

A further defining characteristic is the repetition and variation of past events. In *The Golden Lotus*, this device serves as the building block of narration. In a character-centric novel narration often centers on topics of daily life, leading to a sense that the story lacks plot, and so adding controversy and ambiguity to past events helps move the story forward and create tensions that require resolution.

The writing of *The Golden Lotus* was a watershed event in Chinese literary history. Its dialogue-centric narrative form parted ways with the traditional novelistic conventions to which even early seventeenth-century European novels still adhered. European novels of the period have been viewed as representing the rise of European literature, yet in terms of dialogue *The Golden Lotus* remained unrivaled.

In the popular 1719 English novel *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, the main character is a taciturn hermit. He has few interlocutors on the island, and so his character description is based mainly upon the identity given to him by the narrator. Although Crusoe interacts with Friday during their English lessons, Friday is his slave and not in a position to deviate from the general bent of his narrative. Therefore, the novel displays a remarkable level of narrative consistency.

From the era of *The Golden Lotus* to the era of *The Scholars* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢), the Chinese novel underwent pronounced changes in its narrative form, style, and content. However, the dialogue-centric narrative form continued unabated, though it continued to develop. Contrasting sharply with *The Golden Lotus*, *The Scholars* avoided the artificiality of deliberate narration and relied less on the authority of established scholarly traditions, opening the door for more autonomy by the

characters themselves. Additionally, *The Scholars* increasingly relied on contemporary influences from a wider range of time periods, allowing for a heterogeneous character zone with a multiplicity of voices. Wu Jingzi not only writes real-life acquaintances into his work, but he also follows these characters through their lives, periodically adding additional updates into the novel in the form of dialogue. For Wu, his characters are works in process, shaped layer by layer by the passage of time. The last half of the novel in particular exhibits this layering process through flashbacks in dialogue. In the process, the reader gains a window onto the world of the Qing-era literati.

In short, Wu successfully employed the social networks of the literati as an internal driver of his narrative. In doing so, he influenced the development of the modern novel, demonstrating its possibilities as a literary form and its near-boundless capacity for transformation.

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