Beginning Anew: Repetition, Narrative Desire, and *The Scholars*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the critical impasse surrounding *The Scholars* stems from the narrative structure of the novel. Whether one views *The Scholars* as a committed satire or a "nihilist" text depends on whether one privileges the metaphoric or the metonymic axis of the novel. While metaphor serves to bind the narrative into a critique of the examination system, metonymy, associated with narrative desire, threatens to undermine the didactic message outlined in the prologue. Hence the moral ambiguity of *The Scholars*.

KEY WORDS

metaphor, metonymy, didactic intention, narrative desire, *The Scholars*

Ever since the 1920s when the New Literature Movement (*xin wenxue yundong* 新文學運動) set about forming a canon of vernacular literature, *The Scholars* (Rulin waishi 儒林外史) has enjoyed a secure position in standard Chinese literary histories. Furthermore, through the school curriculum, the novel has reached a far wider public than it ever did during the author's lifetime. Perennially excerpted in Chinese language textbooks, Chapter Three of *The Scholars* is familiar to generations of high-school students in China. The popularity of the work extends to critics as well. Although it has not quite spawned such an immense industry as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Scholars* has its own loyal following among scholars and general readers.

However, if critics in China and abroad are unanimous in considering the work as one of the crowning achievements of Chinese vernacular fiction, they differ widely, sometimes irreconcilably, in their readings. The bulk of critical literature on *The Scholars* is Marxist in vein, emanating as it does from mainland China. Chinese critics praise *The Scholars* for exposing the moral depravity of the literati and attacking the rigid and corrupt imperial civil service examination system. Other critics in the People's Republic emphasize Wu Jingzi's progressive tendencies, which consist of such nebulous, not to say anachronistic, virtues as "traditional democratic" and "modern democratic" ideals.[1]

In keeping with this reading, Marxist critics emphasize the satiric quality of *The Scholars*. Wu Jingzi's depiction of literati pedantry and official corruption supposedly reflects his dissatisfaction with the status quo. This reading of *The Scholars* as a satire is central not only to Marxist criticism but also to its antithesis, which Timothy Wong has

described as nihilist. This view is represented by the Japanese sinologists, Ogawa Tamaki and Inada Takashi, who oppose the view of Wu Jingzi as a committed moral critic. "[B]othered by the mixture of 'good' and 'bad' in the majority of characters," they conclude that *The Scholars* "essentially does little more than poke fun at the faults and foibles of Chinese literati society, and that moreover it does so from an uncommitted and noncondemning point of view." [2] To Ogawa, "one special feature of the work is that it approaches everything with an emotion of tenderness."[3]

Henry Wells, however, who would seem to be in general agreement with these Japanese sinologists, is greatly, even profoundly disturbed by Wu Jingzi's alienness. In his essay on *The Scholars* one comes across such statements as "[Wu Jingzi is] even more Chinese than the Chinese themselves."[4] Apparently, Wu Jingzi's Chineseness consists of his eclecticism, his "reluctance to see . . . opposing forces in opposition," which leaves the reader "on the deep end of ambivalence."[5] The note of despair is unmistakable when Wells writes, "Whereas Westerners are accustomed to ironic or oblique statements or even, to use Mr. Empson's phrase, to seven types of ambiguity, they are seldom if ever confronted in their own literatures with the seventy-times-seven flights of ambiguity found in Wu's masterpiece."[6] Wells goes on to exaggerate by saying that "the ambiguity found in [Strindberg's *To Damascus* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*] seems clarity itself beside the multifold vision of Wu Jingzi."[7] One senses that *The Scholars* provokes an epistemological crisis for Wells.

Timothy Wong positions himself between these "two extremes" of Marxist and nihilist interpretation and proposes a third alternative. Wong acknowledges the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in *The Scholars*, but he concludes that there is a discernible moral concern in Wu Jingzi's satire. The moral constant, according to Wong, is the Confucian eremitic ideal, which is only "obscured by the cataclysmic changes of modern times." [8] Much of his monograph on *The Scholars*, therefore, aims at elucidating "lesser-known aspects of Confucian thought" and uncovering the moral purpose of Wu Jingzi's satire.[9]

The problem with these interpretations is that they all attempt to

rationalize the difficulties inherent in the novel. Wong rightly identifies three areas of difficulty in interpreting *The Scholars*. To begin with, because of the uneven quality of its writing, "modern critics are hard put to explain away all seeming inconsistencies and disparities under a unified scheme."[10] The second area of difficulty is "tied to the internal character of satire" in the book.[11] The narrator consistently refrains from making explicit comments on the characters, which makes it difficult for the modern reader to pin down the narrator's position. Interestingly enough, traditional commentators did not seem to be troubled by the narrator's non-committal attitude. On the contrary, that lack of explicit judgment was much appreciated by the commentators, who were fully aware of what Barthes calls the "cultural code."[12] The third difficulty, according to Wong, is the fact that the work has been used to promote different social causes. Critics "approach the text with *a priori* needs and ideas and interpret it as relevant to their own situations, whether it indeed is or not."[13] Despite these difficulties, critics seek to extract some sort of unity from *The Scholars* and adopt an either/or stance: Wu Jingzi is either a committed moral critic or an amoral author. This critical impasse occurs partly because critics often focus on the referential dimension of the text without paying due attention to the process whereby the text generates itself.[14]

Metaphor, Metonymy, and *The Scholars*

The Scholars begins conventionally enough within a didactic framework. However, the novel is structurally innovative. Set at the end of the Yuan dynasty, the prologue is removed from the rest of the novel in time and space, constituting as it does a self-contained unit. The plot "proper" does not start until Chapter Two. Narrative focus shifts as new characters are introduced. This peculiar structure has led readers and critics to emphasize metonymy in *The Scholars*.

In his classic study of the linguistic problems of aphasia, Roman Jakobson notes that "[t]he development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The

METAPHORIC way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the METONYMIC way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively."[15] What makes aphasia particularly instructive to Jakobson as a linguist is that in aphasia the patient's ability to either substitute alternative signs or combine multiple signs shows varying degrees of impairment. Jakobson further points out that while "in normal verbal behavior both processes are continually operative. . . . careful observation will reveal that under the influence of a cultural pattern, personality, and verbal style, preference is given to one of the two processes over the other."[16] Jakobson cites Biblical poetry and the Russian oral traditions as examples of verbal art in which metaphoric constructions predominate. One might add classical Chinese poetry—especially regulated verse, with its emphasis on strict parallelisms—to the list. The realist novel, on the other hand, is prone to metonymy: "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time."[17] In this context, Lu Xun's analysis of the narrative structure of *The Scholars* becomes particularly interesting.

Lu Xun, whose views on Chinese fiction have been seminal, emphasizes the metonymic axis of *The Scholars*. According to Lu Xun, "The novel has no central plot. . . . Various characters are introduced in succession, their stories starting with their appearance and ending with their exit from the stage. So this long novel is like a group of short stories or a patchwork quilt of silk . . . ."[18] Lu Xun, however, is only partially correct when he points out that there is no linear plot in *The Scholars* and that there are no central characters who dominate the narrative.[19] The center or narrative focus is constantly shifting; characters come and go. The text is thus radically fragmented. Such notions as beginning, closure, and center are all rendered problematic by the narrative structure of *The Scholars*. However, the metonymic axis is governed by a metaphoric economy, which is the didactic framework.

The first chapter of *The Scholars* is a hermeneutic guide to the rest of the work. Through such para-narrative devices as the chapter

heading ("in which an introductory story of a good scholar points the moral of the book"),[20] the narrator indicates that Wang Mian serves as an exemplum. The ensuing chapters of the novel are ostensibly variations on a theme. As the work progresses along the metonymic axis, the metaphoric economy of the work is then supposed to be strengthened. In other words, the novel is meant to be an allegory, for, according to Jakobson, allegory is nothing but the poetic projection of the metaphoric axis onto the metonymic.[21]

Joel Fineman distinguishes between two kinds of allegory: "there are allegories that are primarily perpendicular, concerned more with structure than with temporal extension . . . which makes only the slightest gestures towards full-scale narrative progress." On the other hand, there are allegories that are primarily horizontal, such as picaresque or quest narrative, "where figurative structure is only casually and allusively appended to the circuit of adventures through time."[22] Then there is the "mixed variety, [which] blends both axes, as in *The Canterbury Tales*, where each figurative tale advances the story of the pilgrimage as a whole." Fineman goes on to write,

> Whatever the prevailing orientation of any particular allegory, however, up and down through the declensions of structure, or laterally developed through narrative time, the allegory will be successful as allegory only to the extent that it can suggest the authenticity with which the two coordinating poles bespeak each other, with structure plausibly unfolded in time, and narrative persuasively upholding the distinctions and equivalences described by structure.[23]

Likewise, the intricate mesh of the economy of metaphor and the economy of metonymy remains the locus when dealing with the centripetal and centrifugal forces of *The Scholars*. The ideological position of *The Scholars*, which has bedeviled critics, can be gauged only with these two axes in mind.

Fineman's comment that "[t]he tendency on the part of allegory to read itself, for its theme to dominate its narrative, or as Frye says, to

prescribe the direction of its commentary, suggests the formal or phenomenological affinities of the genre with criticism" is especially apposite to *The Scholars*.[24] In this sense, the chapter heading, which is a para-narrative device, is also meta-narrative.[25] The *Woxian caotang* commentator understands perfectly the author's "masterplan":

> The four words "success, fame, riches, and rank" [*kung ming fu kuei* 功名富貴] are the number one focal point [*cho-yen ch'u* 著眼處] of the whole book. Therefore this theme is broached [*tien-tou* 點透] right at the beginning, though only casually and tersely. All the multifarious variations of the rest of the book are nothing but . . . transformations [*pien-hsiang* 變相] of these four words made manifest. It can be said that this is similar to a blade of grass turning into a sixteen-foot golden Buddha.[26]

In other words, the subsequent narrative episodes are nothing but illustrations of the prologue. At least that is the plan laid out at the beginning of the work. The actualization or lack thereof is another question as one examines the dynamics between the conscious and the unconscious in *The Scholars*.

Repetition and Narrative Desire

In an essay entitled "Freud's Masterplot," Peter Brooks turns to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* for what he calls a "dynamic model" for narrative plot.[27] Brooks starts off by noting Todorov's model of narrative transformation whereby narrative plot is characterized by the tension between difference and resemblance. In other words, narrative operates as metaphor, for metaphor resides in the tension between resemblance and difference, as Aristotle and modern theorists have taught us. At the same time narrative is motivated along a metonymic axis. This recognition of metonymy as another figure of narrative is crucial; it distinguishes Todorov's model of narrative from most formalist and structuralist narrative theory, which construes narrative in spatial and atemporal terms.

Narrative meanings take time to develop. Although at the end of a narrative the reader tries to perceive the narrative in its totality or as a metaphor in which past and present converge, the temporal movement still exists. As Barthes's analysis of plot indicates, the proairetic and hermeneutic codes, of actions and of enigmas and answers, are irreversible. Their interpretation is determined linearly, sequentially, and unidirectionally.[28] After all, the reader is motivated by a passion for meaning, which is also a desire for the end. "It is at the end . . . that recognition brings its illumination, which can shed retrospective light."[29] In fact, the beginning always anticipates the end. The linear movement of narrative has to be arrested before meaning can be structured. Ultimately, the desire for the end is linked to the desire for the human end or death, for it is only at and through death that life acquires meaning or becomes "readable" as a text.

If the narrative is bound by beginning and end, in between is what Barthes calls a problematic "dilatory space," and it is at this juncture that Freud's investigation of ends in relation to beginnings becomes most suggestive in our efforts to construct a dynamic model of plot. Just as narrative is initiated by a plot reiterating a story, Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is likewise inaugurated by Freud confronting the problem of repetition. Freud is intrigued by his patients' compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences in dreams, which seems to contradict the wish-fulfillment theory of dreams. In addition, Freud finds an example from waking life, his grandson's game of staging his mother's disappearance and return while exclaiming *fort* and *da*. The explanation of these enigmatic examples, Freud suggests, may be that the patients and the child gain mastery by moving from a passive to an active role. If that is the case, we have in Freud's postulate a suggestive comment on the "grammar of plot," namely, that "repetition, taking us back again over the same ground, could have to do with the choice of ends."[30] However, Freud is unsure whether the need to repeat might not yield pleasure of its own, whether the child might not in fact gain revenge by staging his mother's disappearance, or whether the need to repeat is more "primitive, elementary, instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides."[31]

Brooks sees a similar compulsion to repeat in literary texts, in which such mnemonic devices in poetry as rhyme, alliteration, assonance, meter, and the trebling of motifs in the folk tale are endemic: "Narrative must ever present itself as a repetition of events that have already happened, and within this postulate of a generalized repetition it must make use of specific, perceptible repetition in order to create plot, that is, to show us a significant interconnection of events."[32] Repetition is then a return, whether it be a return to origins or a return of the repressed.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle then provides an object lesson of how "life" or the story is stimulated into narrative, becomes plot, and embarks upon a state of deviance and *détour* for a certain duration of time, through a minimally complex "extravagance," to use Brooks's word, before returning to the state of quiescence. The energy generated by the *détour* sustains the plot along the temporal axis while repetition as binding serves to produce meaning, which allows the reader to see the text in its totality or as metaphor, without discounting the metonymies. However, the danger of premature discharge or short-circuit always lurks along the way: "The reader experiences the fear—and excitation—of the improper end, which is symmetrical to—but far more immediate and present than—the fear of endlessness."[33]

Both dangers, that of premature death and endless longevity, are present in Wu Jingzi's *The Scholars*. The danger of premature narrative death takes the form of oversameness: "All the multifarious variations of the rest of the book are nothing but . . . transformations of these four words ["success, fame, riches, and rank"]," as the *Woxian caotang* commentator informs us. The work is stimulated into narration through a didactic truism, namely, fame and fortune are ultimately meaningless. As a truism, the beginning returns to an earlier and general cultural discourse. In other words, the beginning points to origins. In the process the didactic beginning undercuts its own originality, since it merely echoes received wisdom. In between the didactic prologue and the conclusion is a pattern of repetition of parallel characters and themes. Unlike the oral storyteller who maximizes narrative longevity,

and thus his livelihood, by elaborating on a basic plot or expanding along the *temporal* axis, Wu Jingzi's narrator forestalls narrative death by constantly beginning anew, or by resorting to the *spatial* dimension, adding on new chapters or *hui* 回 along the way. Thus, we have in *The Scholars* a graphic example of the transformation of *hui* from a temporal reference to a spatial one, from its original sense of a round or session to the modern chirographic meaning of a chapter. The metonymic structure also makes unnecessary a public, ceremoniously announced beginning and ending with all their didactic baggage for each individual narrative episode, so characteristic of much of vernacular fiction. Apart from Chapter One and Chapters Fifty-five and Fifty-six, the two bookends, as it were, the body of *The Scholars* presents the narrator with a pure, unencumbered narrative space. Herein lies the danger of endless longevity.

Because of the peculiar narrative structure of the work, the repetition along the metonymic axis fails to bind the narrative episodes toward a significant metaphor. The metonymic structure of *The Scholars* deprives the individual, discrete narratives that make up the "patchwork quilt of silk," as Lu Xun puts it, of proper ends, thus preventing oversameness and avoiding short-circuit. *The Scholars* is not a collection of isomorphic short stories because the text is always beginning anew. However, metonymy, which is lateral amplification, is potentially endless. *The Scholars*, which is supposed to be an extended allegory with infinite variations, slides the text into perpetual motion, and ultimately becomes formally linked yet ideologically disjointed narrative episodes. The ambiguity or radical "unreadability" of *The Scholars* lies in its inability to reach a proper end or become metaphor. The last two chapters of the novel abruptly arrest the metonymic movement by returning to the mode of homily. Chapters Fifty-five and Fifty-six are connected, not through contiguity as previous narrative episodes are, but through similarity. As Jakobson would say, they project "the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination."[34] By capping a metaphoric end to the work, the last two chapters mask its predominantly metonymic character. The question of how the text regenerates itself time and again then raises

the question of how the text ends or is unable to end itself properly.

Cliché, *The Scholars*, and Improper Ends

The Scholars begins with a conventional prefatory poem:

> Men in their lives
> Go on different ways;
> Generals, statesmen,
> Saints and even immortals
> Begin as ordinary people.
> Dynasties rise and fall,
> Mornings change to evenings;
> Winds from the river
> Bring down old trees
> From a former reign;
> And fame, riches, rank
> May vanish without a trace.
> Then aspire not for these,
> Wasting your days;
> But drink and be merry,
> For who knows
> Where the waters carry the blossom
> Cast over them? [35]

To this poem the narrator adds the following exegesis,

> The idea expressed in this poem is the commonplace one that in human life riches, rank, success and fame are external things. Men will risk their lives in the search for them; yet once they have them within their grasp, the taste is no better than chewed tallow. But from ancient times till now, how many have accepted this? [36]

With this preamble the narrator immediately establishes himself in the time-honored vernacular tradition, which makes didacticism a *sine qua*

non of literature.[37] The Kantian and essentially Romantic notion of art as a disinterested object could not be more foreign to the Chinese writer, who had to justify his *raison d'être* precisely on the ground of the didactic use to which his work could and should be put. Even such a pornographic work as Li Yu's *Carnal Prayer Mat* is presented within an ostensibly didactic framework. That the moral lesson contained in the work is a "commonplace" does not vitiate its validity or value. On the contrary, its value is enhanced by the fact that this is not a lesson easily or frequently learned; such is the paradox presented by the narrator right at the beginning of *The Scholars*.

Several traditional commentators who admire the novel's architectonics single out the first chapter for praise.[38] The commentator of the *Woxian caotang* 臥閒草堂 edition, which is the earliest extant and perhaps the oldest edition of the work, writes:

> Yüan dynasty [1279–1368] *tsa-chü* 雜劇 plays usually begin with a prologue [*hsieh-tzu* 楔子]. The prologue introduces the incident to be related by way of something else. However, if it does not have anything to do with the main incident, this is but the random piling up of words by a hack with no refinement. How can one see in that any subtlety of brush and ink? The author of this book uses the talent of a Ssu-ma Ch'ien 司馬遷 or a Pan Ku 班固 to write fiction [*pai-kuan* 稗官]. From the prologue in the first chapter one can see how the arteries and veins [*hsieh-mai ching-lo* 血脉經絡] of the entire book are finely interconnected [*kuan-ch'uan ling-lung* 貫穿玲瓏]. The author truly is not willing to waste brush and ink.[39]

In this commentator's estimation, the virtue of Wu Jingzi's prologue lies in its consonance with the rest of *The Scholars*, in other words, in its tight economy: nothing is extraneous. The narrative is very suggestively compared to the human body. While *xuemai* 血脉literally means blood vessels, *jingluo* 經絡, which derives from traditional Chinese medicine, is a more unfamiliar concept. It refers to a network of passages consisting of main and collateral channels through which vital energy travels and along which the acupuncture points are

distributed. The idea is clear: there is no circulatory blockage throughout the narrative. Another commentator calls the prologue the "*zhunao* 主腦" (lit. main brain) of the work; still another commentator sees it as a "wake-up call" to those who are still wallowing in dreams of worldly success (*huangxing mengmeng* 喚醒夢夢), alerting the reader to the didactic nature of the narrative.[40] The word for prologue *xiezi*, means literally a wedge or peg. The ideological weight then hinges on the prologue.

The narrator describes the moral of *The Scholars* rather self-deprecatingly, as *laosheng changtan* 老生常談 or "an old literatus's hobby-horse," which Yang Xiangyi and Gladys Yang translate as a "commonplace" idea. The phrase first appeared in *Records of the Three Kingdoms* 三國誌 and *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語. During the thirteen centuries between the appearance of the *Shishuo* and the completion of *The Scholars*, the phrase itself had become a "set" expression, an "old literatus's stock phrase." The chain of paradoxes does not stop here. First, to begin a narrative with a poem is a tried and true convention in the Chinese tradition. The poem that *The Scholars* begins with is itself riddled with such familiar imagery as fallen trees, flowing water, withered flowers, all suggesting vicissitudes of fortune. The narrator is not unaware of the irony as he shows in his exegesis of the poem: "*Zhe shou ci ye bu guo shi ge laosheng changtan* 這首詞也不過是個老生常談."[41] A more literal translation would be, "This *ci*-poem is *also* nothing more than a cliché (*laosheng changtan*)." However, the use of *ye* in the original is more ambiguous than this literal translation would suggest.

The Chinese expression *laosheng changtan* carries roughly the same pejorative force as "cliché" or "platitude." What distinguishes *laosheng changtan* from cliché is its scope. Cliché is a much more capacious term: a cliché covers a spectrum of meanings from a stale expression to an entire discourse. The Chinese phrase *laosheng changtan* almost always refers to a discourse. The phrase resembles a topos or commonplace although topos and commonplace do not carry negative connotations, and *laosheng changtan* is not necessarily a rhetorico-literary term. In fact, usually it is not. Therefore, the subject

of the sentence, "This *ci*-poem," it seems, should be read as a synecdoche. In other words, *ye* does not refer to the verse or versification but the moral therein as evidenced by the immediate exegesis ("[the poem] just (*buguo*) says (*shuo*)"). This is the reading adopted by the Yangs. However, this reading raises a difficulty: it leaves the adverb *ye* unaccounted for. What is the antecedent to which the poem is an addition? Why "also" a cliché as the narrator acknowledges the poem to be? The word *ye* points to an absence rather than a presence, an empty space rather than a specific text: the moral of the poem is also a platitude like . . . ? What, if not the amorphous cultural text (an amalgam of Daoist and Buddhist other-worldly axiology) as a whole and nothing in particular?

As a didactic work, *The Scholars* is predicated on an excess and a lack. On the one hand, it is repetitious, representing merely a return to a prior general, cultural text: the idea that fame, riches, rank, and success are unworthy pursuits is as old as Laozi and Zhuangzi. It is *laosheng changtan*, and, therefore, redundant: "This *ci*-poem is also a cliché (*laosheng changtan*)." If the didacticism legitimates the narrator, this dependence on the cliché immediately undercuts his enterprise because the excess is also a lack: "[The cliché] just (*buguo*) says riches, fortune, success and fame are extraneous." The moral of *The Scholars* does no more (*buguo*) than repeat a good old cliché or truism. The beginning for the narrator is thus fraught with difficulties: he has to play a game of double jeopardy. One cannot begin to narrate unless the narrative is accoutered with a didactic framework as the tradition dictates, and yet the platitude renders the narrative redundant and thus vitiates the act of narration.

Like most didactic works, *The Scholars* revolves around a philosophical cliché, which the narrator makes no attempt to disguise. On the contrary, the narrator highlights this "primal" act of repetition. The didactic paucity, the repetition of a cliché, threatens to annihilate the *raison d'être* of the narrative before it can begin. The narrator has to salvage the work from a premature death through a paradox: " . . . from ancient times till now, how many have accepted this (the *laosheng changtan*)?" In other words, the cliché as value is not really a cliché in

actual behavior. That riches, fortune, success and fame are extraneous is an accepted idea that has not been accepted in practice. *The Scholars* then tries to bridge the gap between discourse and praxis via an act of repetition, adding another "lived" discourse, exemplified by the myriad cast of characters in the novel. The moral bears repeating, which adds to or supplements the tradition. The excessive act of repetition turns out to *add* to, and *supplements* (via difference) anterior discourses.

This move by the narrator is not only justified on ideological grounds but also motivated by the desire to narrate. The cliché is a return to (didactic) origins as well as a return of the repressed. Having made his plea, the narrator does not waste any time but immediately begins the prologue to illustrate the moral. A stock phrase from vernacular fiction, *xianhua xiushuo* 閒話休說 (let's cut the chit-chat)—a phrase which is often used after a digression—would not be out of the place here in the prologue. One notices the remarkable brevity and fluidity of the prose commentary. It bears remembering that in Feng Menglong's *Sanyan* 三言 the prose commentary or *ruhua* 入話 assumes great importance as an intermediate space between the opening poem and the main narrative. It is where the narrator establishes his didactic role. In many *Sanyan* stories, the narrator laboriously comments on the prefatory poem line by line, elucidating any obscure allusions and reinforcing the moral lesson introduced in the poem. The prose commentary recreates a narrator/audience relationship that is reminiscent of oral storytelling and provides the requisite legitimacy to the narrator's enterprise. The consistency and ceremoniousness underscore the "public" nature of the opening sequence in Feng Menglong's fiction.

By contrast, in *The Scholars* the narrator glosses over the prefatory poem and swiftly proceeds to the prologue. Instead of pointing out the profundity of the moral lesson, the narrator downplays its originality, thus paying an underhanded compliment to the reader. Unlike the untutored reader implied in much of Feng Menglong's fiction, the implied reader of *The Scholars* is sophisticated and fully literate, capable of detecting any trite moral posturing. There is no question of orality, real or recreated. With Wu Jingzi, one is firmly on

chirographic territory.[42] The conventional opening sequence becomes a convenient pre-text for the narrator, obviating the need to radically depart from tradition, a need that is to engross the narrator of *The Dream of the Red Chamber.* Tradition, in this case didactic fiction, enables the narrator to begin his enterprise immediately without risking paralysis.

Ambivalence, however, is part and parcel of a cliché. On the one hand, as a quotation, a cliché has to accord more or less with the text in which it is embedded. On the other hand, it resides in another—wider—discourse, which is both exterior and anterior to the narrative. This double status confers on the cliché a degree of autonomy and creates the impression of a foreign body in the narrative.[43] The moral cliché in the prologue of *The Scholars* is not only an iteration of the vaguely Daoist and Buddhist philosophical tradition, it is cliché raised to the nth power given the serial narratives. As a didactic work, indeed a highly logocentric work, *The Scholars* revolves around the prologue. The question of fit or appositeness between the moral and the ensuing exemplars then assumes central importance.

As each page is turned, one journeys deeper into the novel where the conscious and unconscious interact with each other and play out their drama. Underneath the conscious, which operates according to the reality principle, is a labyrinth of unconscious desire that constantly demands satisfaction, the desire to narrate, to extend the pleasure of narration, the desire to avert death.[44] The mechanism of repetition built into the metonymic narrative structure ensures a perpetual beginning anew of narratives while forever forestalling closure. The metonymic axis, therefore, ensures the possibility of narration; indeed, it prolongs the narrative. With the introduction of each new character, the narrative begins anew. If eros prolongs the organism's road to death as Freud suggests, the narrative structure of *The Scholars* operates in the same fashion and prolongs the life of the work. The metonymic axis gratifies the desire to narrate without ensuring that the coordinating poles, that is, metaphor and metonymy, "bespeak each other," in Joel Fineman's words.

It is worth repeating that the narrative structure of *The Scholars*

consists of a concatenation of episodes that are more or less linear. One cannot speak of the narrative in the singular as far as *The Scholars* is concerned. Therefore, in addition to the detour at the macro level, there are also detours within the individual narrative episodes. A good example of the middle of the plot as "dilatory space" is the story of the old scholar Zhou Jin, who appears in the second chapter, which is, we recall, the first narrative unit proper after the didactic prologue. Chapter Two is characterized by a technique of indirection, retardation as well as mirroring, that is, repetition of parallel characters.

Although Chapter Two nominally belongs to Zhou Jin (as indicated by the chapter heading), Zhou Jin's appearance in the narrative is preempted by the overbearing Bailiff Xia, which befits Zhou Jin's lowly status in the community. Thus, Zhou Jin is marginalized not only socially but also symbolically at the outset of the narrative. The person who dominates the center stage is the bailiff. Through the mouth of this snobbish parvenu, we get our first impression of Zhou Jin from the bailiff's perspective. Instead of starting with the titular character of the chapter, which would be the most straightforward, the most economical way of beginning the narrative, the narrator allows Bailiff Xia to appropriate the textual space, economy in this sense being inimical to narrative longevity. The colorful secondary character upstages Zhou Jin and becomes the center of attention for a good part of Chapter Two. Bailiff Xia, in turn, is anticipated by still another colorful character, his in-law Shen Xiangfu, with whom Bailiff Xia shares many characteristics. The insertion of the bailiff as a narrator who is otherwise unmotivated at the beginning of Chapter Two becomes a distraction as the storyteller becomes the story itself. Interestingly enough, the narratorial retardation is mirrored in Bailiff Xia's own narrative about Zhou Jin. Bailiff Xia quickly digresses from his subject, Zhou Jin. Instead he recounts with great relish the celebration banquet of the Gu family:

> He's over sixty. The former magistrate placed him first on the list of county candidates, but he's never been able to pass the prefectural examination. Mr. Gu employed him as a tutor for his son for three

> years; and his son passed the examination last year, at the same time as Mei Jiu from our village. The day that young Gu was welcomed back from the school he wore a scholar's cap and a broad red silk sash, and rode a horse from the magistrate's stable, while all the gongs and trumpets sounded. When he reached the door of his house, I and the other yamen officials offered him wine in the street. Then Mr. Zhou was asked over. Mr. Gu toasted his son's teacher three times and invited him to sit in seat of honour. Mr. Zhou chose as entertainment the opera about Liang Hao, who won first place in the palace examination when he was eighty; and Mr. Gu was not all pleased. But then the opera showed how Liang Hao's pupil won the same distinction at seventeen or eighteen, and Mr. Gu knew that it was a compliment to his son. That made him feel better. If you want a teacher, I'll invite Mr. Zhou for you.[45]

To the bailiff the successful Gus make a far more interesting story than the hapless old tutor. The pomp and circumstance of the successful Gu family provides a spectacle that is far more congenial to the snobbish narrator. This digressive analepsis about the scion of the prominent family of the village seems unmotivated since the subject of the bailiff's representation is Zhou Jin, yet at the level of the narrative, the description of the celebration banquet of the Gu family is an effective technique, contrasting the rising young student and the frustrated teacher and his abject status.

A direct result of the digressiveness of Chapter Two, and indeed of *The Scholars* as a whole, is a lack of closure. While the prologue would seem to suggest that the moral of *The Scholars* is that "success, fame, rank, and riches" are mere external trappings and therefore ultimately meaningless, a significant number of the subsequent chapters seem to deviate from the moral. The "cautionary tales" oddly do not corroborate the prologue. Not only do the characters not find "fame, success, riches and rank" extraneous, the drastic changes that occur after the attainment of these things prove their importance. Fame and fortune are shown to be critical, even essential to happiness as these characters see it, which is to say, as the public defines it—for

unlike the hermit Wang Mian, Zhou Jin is mired in a world which esteems material success. Neither Zhou Jin nor Fan Jin finds that *gongming fugui* taste like "chewed tallow." On the contrary, they thrive on them. In the words of the narrator they "will risk their lives in the search for them." However, "once they have them within their grasp," they *do not* find their taste "no better than chewed tallow." As didactic tales, the stories are incomplete because they deal only with the trials and tribulations the characters face *before* they achieve success, and not after. The predicate of the moral is, therefore, absent. The narratives never get to show the vanity of *gongming fugui* after Zhou Jin and Fan Jin reach their goals. If figural interpretation is the only operative hermeneutics inscribed in *The Scholars*, as the prologue and traditional commentators insist (that is, Wang Mian is a sort of figura to the rest of the cast of characters of *The Scholars*) the lack of closure prevents those narrative episodes from becoming fully predicated narrative sentences or full illustrations of the moral of the prologue.[46] Thus, while the subsequent narrative units of *The Scholars* are contiguous with the prologue, they are not apposite. Many of them could even possibly be read as apologies for *gongming fugui,* which bring happiness and dignity to the erstwhile disappointed scholars.

What is striking about the story of Zhou Jin is the disproportionate distribution in narrative duration. The downtrodden scholar is subjected to a series of misfortunes. First through Bailiff Xia, we learn abut Zhou's total loss of dignity at the banquet when he chooses an opera at his own expense to flatter his host. Even the next banquet, which is supposedly in his honor to mark his employment at the village school, turns out to be another opportunity for an upstart like Mei Jiu to humiliate the unlucky old scholar. This is followed by his summary dismissal at the bailiff's recommendation from the village school which has just hired him. In order to keep body and soul together, Zhou Jin then has to accept his merchant brother-in-law's offer and demote himself from a tutor to a bookkeeper. In a society which believes in the superiority of the literati to all other social classes, that change represents a descent in social status. The nadir of his fortune *and* the climax of the narrative has yet to come. After the merchants

arrive in the provincial capital, Zhou Jin pays a visit to the examination hall where all the aspiring candidates congregate to try their luck. The old man is so traumatized by what he sees that he bangs his head on a desk and loses consciousness:

> Since Zhou Jin had nothing to do, he strolled through the streets until he saw a group of workmen who said that they were going to repair the examination hall. He followed them to the gate of the school, wanting to go in, but the gateman cracked his whip and drove him away.
>
> That evening he told his brother-in-law how much he wanted to look over the examination hall, and Jin had to tip the gateman to get him in. Some of the other merchants decided to go too, and asked the guild head to act as their guide. This time they simply sailed through the gate of the school, because the gateman, whose palm had been greased, made no attempt to stop them, but rather pointed to the gate, and said, "This is the gate for scholars." They went into a corridor with examination cells on both sides, and the guild head told them, "This is Number One. You can go in and have a look."
>
> Zhou Jin went in, and when he saw the desk set there so neatly, tears started to his eyes. He gave a long sigh, knocked his head against the desk, and slipped to the ground unconscious.[47]

This series of misfortunes would be sadistic were it not for the equally fantastic reversal of fortune that is about to ensue. In contrast to the long litany of adversities that Zhou Jin has to go through, the account of his success is brief:

> As luck would have it, it was just the time for the preliminary test for the provincial examination. Zhou Jin took the test and came first of all the candidates from the Imperial College. On the eighth of the eighth month he went to the examination school for the provincial examination, and the sight of the place where he had cried made him unexpectedly happy. As the proverb says, "Joy puts

> heart into a man." Thus he wrote seven excellent examination papers, then went back to the guild, for Jin and the others had not yet completed their purchases. When the results were published, Zhou Jin had passed with distinction, and all the merchants were delighted.[48]

The fairy tale quality of this account is obvious. The morphology of the fairy tale is clearly discernible. The story of Zhou Jin is essentially a Cinderella story with a few differences: with the help of an external force, that is, good luck which takes the place of a benevolent supernatural being, Zhou Jin's life completely turns around. The story of Zhou Jin is clearly not in the realistic mode. For one thing, the narrator of realistic fiction would take extra care to avoid serendipity, especially when it could cause such fundamental changes to a character's life as it does in Zhou Jin's case, even if serendipity does happen "in life." The end also reminds the reader of the fairy-tale nature of the narrative: all the benevolent agents (the merchants) are happy. There is no attempt at psychological realism. Zhou Jin's totally unalloyed happiness when he sees the place which has so traumatized him before is contrary to everyday psychology. The cliché that is offered as the explanation for Zhou Jin's frame of mind ("Joy puts heart into a man") shows the narrator's lack of interest in plausibility. From his nadir, which is described as a death rather than a temporary loss of consciousness (只因這一死), Zhou Jin quickly ascends to the zenith of his fortune. The symbolic death and subsequent revival and change of fortune is of course another common motif in fairy tales:

> He passed the metropolitan examination too; and after the palace examination he was given an official post. In three years he rose to the rank of censor and was appointed commissioner of education for Guangdong Province.[49]

At this point Zhou Jin's metamorphosis is complete. With the attainment of "riches, rank, success and fame," Zhou Jin is now able to wield influence and in doing so becomes a benefactor to his *alter ego*,

Fan Jin, to whom he is already favorably disposed, even though the two have not yet met.

> Now though Zhou Jin engaged several secretaries, he thought, "I had bad luck myself so long; now that I'm in office I mean to read all the papers carefully. I mustn't leave everything to my secretaries, and suppress real talent." Having come to this decision, he went to Guangdong to take up his post.[50]

At this point Zhou Jin begins to fade out, and Fan Jin begins to fade in. It is impossible to pinpoint exactly where one narrative ends and the other begins. The metonymic structure of the work thus short-circuits the moral by depriving the narrative of closure while at the same time ensuring the repetition of the "incomplete" narrative; the story of Fan Jin essentially duplicates the previous narrative of Zhou Jin through a series of permutations.

The second part of Chapter Three, the passage excerpted in the standard Chinese language textbook, of course, is well known to every high-school student in China. It is popular with students and critics alike. Students enjoy the comic relief in Butcher Hu's colorful language and Fan Jin's temporary insanity. Marxist critics read this part as a clear expression of Wu Jingzi's condemnation of the examination system. Fan Jin's loss of sanity and his father-in-law's verbal abuses of him are high drama indeed, yet the element of wish-fulfillment has been—curiously—ignored by critics who choose to read the episode as a piece of social criticism.

To all intents and purposes Zhou Jin and Fan Jin are the same character, and the story of Fan Jin essentially duplicates that of Zhou Jin. It replaces the first Cinderella fairy tale with yet another Cinderella fairy tale. The near identity between Zhou Jin and Fan Jin is suggested in the first place by their personal names, which are written with the same character 進. Given that parents take great care that their children's names are individual, it is most peculiar that these two characters who interact so closely should have the same given name. The same kind of near reduplication recurs in Zhou Jin and Fan Jin's

places of origin: the former comes from Shandong 山東; the latter from Guangdong 廣東. The two are practically coeval: Zhou Jin is just over sixty; Fan Jin is fifty-four. Both have a grizzled beard. One is a struggling, frustrated candidate; the other is an ex-struggling, frustrated candidate, which is perhaps the most important similarity between the two. Both suffer great indignities before their lives completely turn around, and just as Zhou Jin's success at the examination is more or less a fluke, Fan Jin's success is equally fortuitous. Zhou Jin must have identified himself with Fan Jin when he first saw the latter in the examination school as he was proctoring the examination:

> The last candidate to enter was thin and sallow, had a grizzled beard and was wearing an old felt hat. Guangdong has a warm climate; still this was the twelfth month, and yet this candidate had on a linen gown only, so he was shivering with cold as he took his paper and went to his cell. *Zhou Jin made a mental note of this before sealing their doors.* [51] (Italics mine)

Zhou Jin himself looked this shabby not long ago. However, there is more. When Zhou Jin asks, "You are Fan Jin, aren't you?"

> Kneeling, Fan Jin answered, "Yes, Your Excellency."
> "How old are you this year?"
> "I gave my age as thirty. Actually, I am fifty-four."
> "How many times have you taken the examination?"
> "I first went in for it when I was twenty, and I have taken it over twenty times since then."
> "How is it you have never passed?"
> "My essays are too poor," replied Fan Jin, "so none of the honourable examiners will pass me."
> "That may not be the only reason," said Commissioner Zhou. "Leave your paper here, and I will read it through carefully." [52]

Zhou Jin speaks from a position of knowledge when he says, "That may not be the only reason." He *knows* that one's success in the examination

has little to do with one's ability; he attributed his own repeated failures to negligent examiners. He will, therefore, make sure that the same fate will not befall Fan Jin. However, Zhou Jin sees nothing in Fan Jin's essay to recommend itself and feels Fan Jin's repeated failures were justified: "Whatever is the fellow driving at in this essay?" Nevertheless, Zhou Jin is reluctant to give up on Fan Jin. The narrator's description of Zhou Jin's reading process is a stroke of genius. It is understated and full of irony:

> "I might as well have another look at Fan Jin's paper. If he shows the least talent, I'll pass him to reward his perseverance." He read it through again, and this time felt there was something in it. . . . Then he read Fan Jin's paper again. This time he gave a gasp of amazement. "Even I failed to understand this paper the first two times I read it!" he exclaimed. "But after reading it for the third time, I realize it is the most wonderful essay in the world—every word a pearl. This shows how often bad examiners must have suppressed real genius." Hastily taking up his brush, he carefully drew three circles on Fan Jin's paper, marking it as first. [53]

Fan Jin's life completely turns around after that—just as Zhou Jin's did. Entrusted by Zhou Jin, Fan Jin is eager to play benefactor to someone else. The two Jins therefore become the guardian angels of frustrated, unsuccessful scholars.

More than one critic has commented on this repetitive pattern of similar characters and motives, which persists throughout the bulk of *The Scholars*. In an essay entitled "Ritual and Narrative Structure in *Ju-lin wai-shih*," Shuen-fu Lin writes,

> numerous smaller units or correspondences, such as those between individual characters or incidents, can be discerned throughout the entire work. The reader can easily identify, for example, the interesting parallels among such pairs of characters as the Lou brothers, the Yen brothers, the Tu cousins, and the Yü brothers. These smaller parallels constitute a large portion of the narrative

> texture as the incidents unfold.[54]

Lin goes on to suggest a tripartite structure with each part containing similar types of characters and thematic motives.[55] In his essay "*Lun Rulin waishi de changpian yishu jiegou* 論儒林外史的長篇藝術結構 (On the Large-scale Artistic Structure of *The Scholars*), Huang Bingze proposes a quadripartite structure, while also noting the repetitive pattern of parallel characters and themes.[56] Part One (Chaps. 2–16), for instance, focuses on three types of scholars. Those like Zhou Jin and Fan Jin are committed to the civil service examination system and aspire to seek their careers through the orthodox avenue. Others like Wang Hui, Tang Feng, and Yan Gongsheng, abuse the power that they acquire with their academic success. Still others fail at the examination and try to emulate ancient sages. The characters that dominate Part Two (Chaps. 17–30) try to seek fame and fortune outside the examination system by posing as unconventional characters. Part Three (30–43) depicts idealistic characters who try to reform society through the promotion of *li* or Confucian rituals, agriculture, education, etc. Finally, Part Four (Chaps. 44–54) concentrates on society's moral degeneration. Within each section similar motifs and character types are grouped together. The metonymic structure provides the transitions between the four sections until the last two chapters.

In a passage often quoted in the debate on the narrative structure of *The Scholars*, an anonymous commentator writes:

> The structure of *The Scholars* is inevitably loose. Since the author wrote without first deciding upon the number of characters and incidents to be included, his book can end or continue at any place. The reason that it can end at any place is that the incidents arise with the characters, and the characters vanish with the incidents. The reason that it can go on at any place is that there is neither an end with the disappearance of these two elements nor a beginning with their emergence. The shortcoming here lies in the fact that there are branches but no trunk. How can we be sure of this? Could we say that it uses character as the trunk? But Du Shaoqing alone

> does not tie together all the characters of the entire work. Could we say that it uses incidents as the trunk? But the two themes of 'power' and 'profit' do not encompass all the incidents either. There is no doubt, therefore, that each chapter is a separate chapter and each section a separate section.[57]

There are several arguable points in this passage. One may speculate whether the author has a conscious plan concerning the number of characters and episodes. Most traditional commentators seem to concur with the *Woxian caotang* commentary quoted earlier: the peculiar narrative structure of *The Scholars* is not a shortcoming. The commentator is, however, quite perceptive when he points out that the work can begin or continue at any place through contiguity. Although there are linkages among the individual chapters, therefore, they are not completely separate; the commentator is right to suggest that the trunk is overwhelmed or obscured by the branches. The commentator is also quite astute when he writes that the two themes of "power" and "profit" do not cover all the narrative incidents.[58]

There is, therefore, a similarity or metaphoric deficit. Metonymy subverts metaphor in *The Scholars*. The mode of didactic fiction which is consciously dictated by the reality principle is undermined by the desire to narrate, the constant deferral of closure, and by narrative detours. Seen in this light, the metonymic narrative structure of *The Scholars* is dictated not only by a conscious decision to achieve a certain ideological end, to drive the moral home through repetition, or to bind the textual energies toward the production of meaning/metaphor, but also by an unconscious desire to postpone the end of the narrative, to prolong its life. For this reason, the individual episodes cannot be self-contained stories. The narrative structure of *The Scholars* is as much a weakness as a reviving mechanism, putting off narrative closure or death.

However, as Peter Brooks writes, "the interminable never can be finally bound in a plot. . . . It is the role of the fictional plots to impose an end which suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading. A narrative, that is, wants at its end to refer us back to its middle, to the

web of the text: to recapture us in its doomed energies."[59] The last two chapters of *The Scholars* try to do precisely that. If the narrative episodes wedged between the prologue and the epilogue lack closure, the imposition of Chapters Fifty-five and Fifty-six ensures a formal conclusion. The metonymic chain grinds to a sudden halt, and metaphor attempts to resume control by returning to the didactic beginning.

The demarcation line is the customary tease at the end of Chapter Fifty-four: "But to know what happened next, you must read the chapter which follows."[60] Paradoxically, Chapter Fifty-five has nothing to do with the previous chapter. Therefore, the storyteller's phrase entails neither suspension nor extension of narrative action. This relapse to the ornamental use of the oral formula is particularly telling here. The end is not motivated by internal logic but is simply that which follows something else. Chapter Fifty-four is a rambling story of a courtesan plagued by poor health. According to a fortune-teller, the only way for her to regain her health is to atone for a sin committed in her previous existence. The chapter ends with the courtesan becoming a Buddhist nun in a nearby convent, bringing her story to a denouement and arresting the metonymic slide in the process. No more new characters are introduced via contiguity.

The next two chapters return to the prologue in more ways than one. Chapter Fifty-five is removed from the rest of the work both temporally and narratively. Like Chapter One, the penultimate chapter is in the mode of exemplary fiction. The four eccentrics of Chapter Fifty-five mirror Wang Mian in their rejection of worldly fame and fortune. The difference, and it is a significant one, is that Ji Xianian, Wang Tai, Gai Kuan and Jing Yuan are cardboard characters, who embody the Chinese phrase, *qin qi shu hua* 琴棋書畫 (expertise in zither (*qin*)-playing, chess-playing, calligraphy, and painting), leisure activities conventionally associated with the literati. The narrator does not take the time to develop the characters as he did with Wang Mian. Wang Tai, in particular, is sketched in a few perfunctory sentences.

Chapter Fifty-Six returns to an even earlier precedent. The chapter, which consists mainly of a list of the names of scholars upon

whom the emperor bestows posthumous honors, clearly imitates the final chapter of *Water Margins*, which also concludes with the emperor conferring honors on the bandit heroes. The effect is to call attention to its artificiality: the symmetry between Chapters One and Fifty-five, and the conscious echoing of a literary precedent in Chapter Fifty-six, point up the structure of the text. The symmetry of the end is dictated by the beginning which demands formal closure, while masking the unending narrative episodes in between.

This fissure between the formal completeness at the macro level and the lack of closure at the micro-narrative level makes possible the widely divergent interpretations of *The Scholars*. The question of whether the text is a satire on the civil service examination, as the Marxists allege, or nihilist diversion as Ogawa and Inada insist, is ultimately unanswerable because either alternative would privilege metaphor or metonymy, which interact with each other in *The Scholars* without finally converging. Marxist and Confucian critics emphasize sameness or metaphor in *The Scholars*, whereas Ogawa and Inada emphasize metonymy. Brooks writes, "we must have metonymy in order to reach metaphor."[61] What *The Scholars* teaches us is that metaphor is vulnerable to endless metonymies. Insofar as meaning is achievable only at and through death as Sartre points out, by tacking on a metaphorical ending, *The Scholars* produces a questionable obituary.[62]

NOTES

[1] According to this school of thinking, the traditional democratic ideals originate in the people's opposition to the feudal ideology and in their yearning for equality, which is reflected in Wu Jingzi's "dissatisfaction with the ruling class" and his sympathy towards the disenfranchised:

> In China's long feudal society, because of the cruel exploitation by the ruling-class and severe oppression, the people and the disenfranchised progressive intellectuals within the ruling-class formed democratic thinking in opposition to feudal ideology in their rebellions and struggles. This long tradition of

democratic thinking often manifests itself in literature in terms of either dissatisfaction with the ruling-class or praise for the noble character of the people and sympathy toward their sufferings.

Rulin waishi lunwenji 儒林外史論文集 (Hefei: Anhui renmin, 1982) 117.

Wu Jingzi's anti-feudal ideology, for instance, leads him to affirm economic self-reliance in contradistinction to age-old Confucian contempt for physical labor. Wang Mian, Shen Qiongzhi, the four eccentrics and Bao Wenqing, the actor, are all embodiments of this virtue; they are counterpoints to a host of parasitic, ignoble literati characters depicted in *The Scholars*. Wu Jingzi therefore turns the traditional hierarchy which values learning over menial labor topsy-turvy. Wu Jingzi's endorsement of early Confucian "humanitarian government" (*renzheng* 仁政) is another manifestation of the author's progressive ideology.

Wu Jingzi's so-called modern democratic values are supposedly rooted in the burgeoning capitalist relations of production that underwent a second phase of development in mid-eighteenth century China after setbacks at the beginning of the Qing dynasty:

> Great writers generally are all representatives of progressive thinking of their time. Wu Jingzi lived in the first half of the eighteenth century. The germ of capitalist relations of production that emerged in the second half of the Ming dynasty had by that time started to grow again after setbacks and suppressions at the beginning of the Qing dynasty. That germ of new relations of production reflected itself ideologically as the demand for individual liberty and equality. (*Ibid.*,121)

Critics credit Wu Jingzi for his sympathetic treatment of women although there are only a handful of women in a work that features more than three hundred and eighty characters (Teng Yun, *Luwenji* 128). However, this lone liberated woman, who refuses to become a concubine to a wealthy salt merchant attracts a great deal of attention from the critics

[2] See Timothy Wong, *Wu Ching-tzu* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978) 66.

[3] Quoted in Wong 66.

[4] See Henry W. Wells, "An Essay on the *Ju-lin Wai-shi*," *Tamkang Review* 2. 1 (April 1971): 143–52.

[5] Wells 149, 145.

[6] Wells 151.

[7] Wells 151.

[8] Wong 62.

[9] Wong 69.

[10] Wong 61.

[11] Wong 61.

[12] Roland Barthes identifies five codes "under which all the textual signifiers can be grouped:" the general code, the code of actions, the hermeneutic code, the cultural or referential code, and the semic or thematic code. The cultural code consists of "references to a science or a body of knowledge." See *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 18.

[13] Wong 62.

[14] Shuen-fu Lin is one exception. For a good summary of the debate on the narrative structure of the work, see Lin's "Ritual and Narrative Structure in *Ju-lin wai-shih*," in *Chinese Narrative* (Andrew Plaks, ed., Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 244–265. Lin also takes up the difficult task of finding unity in *The Scholars* via the Confucian concept of ritual or *li* 禮.

[15] "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in Jakobson and Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, 4th ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1980) 90.

[16] Jacobson and Halle 90.

[17] Jacobson and Halle 92.

[18] See Lu Xun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages P, 1964) 290.

[19] Martin Huang points out the parallel between the narrative structure and the travel motif in the novel: "the novel's quick shifting of narrative focus seems to be paralleled (or necessitated) by the frequent movements of many characters—travel is a constant occupation for many characters," *Literati and Self-Representation: Autobiographical Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century Chinese Novel* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995) 53.

[20] *The Scholars*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign

Languages P, 1973) 1.

[21] "Linguistics and Poetics," in *The Structuralists: From Marx to Lévi-Strauss*, ed. R. and R. DeGeorge (New York: Anchor, 1972) 95.

[22] Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981) 31.

[23] Fineman 31.

[24] Fineman 28.

[25] By para-narrative devices I mean chapter headings, title of the narrative, epigraphs, etc., which are literally outside a narrative. By meta-narrative I have in mind discourses which in some way comment on the narrative.

[26] Trans. Shuen-fu Lin, in David Rolston ed, *How to Read the Chinese Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) 252.

[27] The following is a summary of Brooks' reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which I find very illuminating. Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot: Questions of Narrative," in Shoshana Feldman ed., *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1977) 280–300.

[28] See Barthes, *S/Z* 37.

[29] Brooks 282.

[30] Brooks 286.

[31] Freud 23.

[32] Brooks 283.

[33] Brooks 296.

[34] *Linguistics and Poetics* 95.

[35] *The Scholars* 1.

[36] *The Scholars* 1–2.

[37] Thus, unlike Li Yu's *Carnal Prayer Mat*, *The Scholars* would be an example of the "positive," "'hortatory'" aspect of didacticism. See Leo Chan, *Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts: Ji Yun and Eighteenth-Century Literati Storytelling* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1998) 150. See also Chan's comments on the central importance of the *wen yi zao dao* 文以載道 doctrine (literature as a vehicle for conveying the Way) in the Chinese literary tradition, *ibid.*, 153–59.

[38] Admirers of the novel's structure are legion among traditional

commentators of *The Scholars*. A typical response is that of the Woxian caotang commentator:

> Writing a big book is like an artisan's constructing a mansion. The artisan has to have the whole structure [*jiegou* 結構] in his mind before starting in. He must know where to put the main hall, the sleeping chambers, the study, the kitchen, and the stables. Only after everything has been plotted out can he begin the actual construction work. (*How to Read the Chinese Novel* 282)

[39] Trans. Shuen-fu Lin, *ibid.*, 252.

[40] See *Rulin waishi huiping huijiao ben* 儒林外史匯評匯校本, 2 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1984).

[41] See Henry Zhao's comment on the narrator's awareness of the "banality" of the trope, *The Uneasy Narrator* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995) 67, footnote 32.

[42] I am borrowing the term from Walter Ong, See Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

[43] According to Laurent Jenny,

> [Le cliché] 《joue》 par rapport au texte, comme une cheville mal adaptée, et en même temps il le 《déborde》. En tant que système signifiant, il semble à la fois qu'il s'intègre à la narration—plus ou moins bien suivant le niveau culturel du lecteur—et qu'il participe d'un autre 《texte》, 《texte culturel》 extérieur au récit et qui confère au cliché une sorte d'autonomie, faisant ainsi naître une impression de corps étrange dans la narration.

See "Structure et Fonction du Cliché," *Poetique* 12 (April 1972): 485.

[44] One thinks of Scheherazade. For the resourceful princess, the postponement of narrative endings is literally her way to life.

[45] *The Scholars* 18.

[46] For the idea of narrative as a predicated sentence, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Grammaire du Décameron* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969) and *Poetique de la Prose* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971. Richard Howard, trans. *The Poetics of Prose*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977).

[47] *The Scholars* 25; translation slightly modified.

[48] *The Scholars* 28.

[49] *The Scholars* 28.

[50] *The Scholars* 28–29.

[51] *The Scholars* 29.

[52] *The Scholars* 29.

[53] *The Scholars* 30.

[54] Shuen-fu Lin, "Ritual and Narrative Structure in *Ju-lin wai-shih*" in *Chinese Narrative* 255–56.

[55] Lin 260–64. C. T. Hsia also sees a tripartite structure in *The Scholars*. See *The Classic Chinese Novel* 224–25.

[56] *Rulin waishi yanjiu lunwenji* (Hefei: Anhui renmin, 1982) 284–86, 282–97.

[57] Quoted in Lin 244.

[58] The most famous example would be Chapter Thirty-eight, a meandering tale of Guo Xiaozi, a filial son in search of his long-lost father, and his encounters with two hungry tigers, an unidentified monster, two highway robbers, etc. The two episodes involving the tigers seem to have been lifted from two Qing, and Tang *biji* entries. See Li Hanqiu, *Rulin waishi yanjiu ziliao* 儒林外史研究資料 (Shanghai: Guji, 1984) 20.

[59] Brooks 297.

[60] *The Scholars* 592.

[61] Brooks 295.

[62] It is interesting to note here that the authenticity of Chapter Fifty-Six is the source of a long-standing controversy. For information on the texts of *The Scholars*, see Wong, *Wu Ching-tzu*, Appendix 123–30.