

## The Exploration of Public Sphere in *The Scholars*

Kaini Xiong<sup>1, a, \*</sup>, Yong Yi<sup>2, b</sup>, Qian Su<sup>1, c</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Normal School, Hubei Polytechnic University, Huangshi 435003, P. R. China

<sup>2</sup>Normal School, Chengdu University, Chengdu 610106, P.R.China

<sup>a</sup>4128920@qq.com, <sup>b</sup>31966272@qq.com, <sup>c</sup>3209592878@qq.com

---

*Abstract: Based on “public sphere” which raised by Habermas, the paper analyses the special form of public sphere in The Scholars. It showed the procedure of the exploration to public sphere in this novel. we discussed the demands of discourse construction, the default exploration in different elements and the reflection on the phenomenon.*

*Keywords: The Scholars, Wu Jingzi, the Gentry literati, public sphere, the exploration*

---

### 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As Jürgen Habermas pointed out, “the bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.” [1]

The conception of “public sphere” was raised in the context of the western modern civil society, which actually was a public forum. In another words, “in this forum, private come together to a public, and forced the public authority operated on the legal foundation of the public opinion. The paper analyses the possibility of the instruction and the default in the Chinese special form of “public sphere”.

### 2. THE DEMANDS OF THE DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTION

During the Ming-Qing dynasty, the commodity economy developed rapidly. The values changed dramatically, and the position of the gentry literati was marginalized in the end feudal period which lead to the power of the discourse. It could be found that there were many cents in the exploration of the discourse environment which fit the fundamental elements of public sphere. In a manner of speaking, the pursuit behavior of the power can be regard as the construction of the he Chinese special form of “public sphere”. “Public sphere in China had many non-typical forms which might not be called public sphere, if they compared with the

history of the Europe”,[2]Jilin Xu said. Indeed, in the case that “the own vein of Chinese history”, as the main constructor of the discourse space, the gentry literati played a key role. See from the longitudinal order of “the center authority-the bureaucratic- the gentry literati- the public populace, the traditional gentry literati stayed in the position that the imperial power can’t reach while they contacted the public populace.“The gentry literati not only assisted the kings to rule the world in the court, but also lead the public as the moral leadership and the local elite in the suburbs. The society and the country of ancient China showed an organic whole by the gentry literati.”[3]

*The Scholars* wrote by Wu Jinzi was a novel what describes the gentry literati in the end feudal period. It included lots of characters: the imperial examination candidates, celebrities, sages, squires, crackpots, etc... As the representative of the gentry literati ,who had either a certain culture, or a certain fame and reputation. All the behavior of these characters indicated the deep thought about the society. According to the great tension by the migration of the characters which showed the trend on the center of Nan Jing, meanwhile far away from the crown, Wu Jinzi tried to build a secular space that constituted of the gentry literati diligently, and explored the possibility of the ritual music enlightenment. It could be found the conceal intention that the author wanted to construct a discourse space everywhere. These clues indeed met the elements of “public sphere”, which were hard to avoid failure yet.

### **3. THE DISILLUSION OF THE DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTION**

According to the summarize by Dingzan Li, public sphere included six elements that included public forum, private people, meet, public opinion, legality, public authority. These six elements of “public sphere” determined the whole features of “public sphere”, which were the key to establish the discourse construction. In another words, openness and equality, private and meet, legality and authority which suggestion the possibility of establishment, were reflected and extended in various degrees of *The Scholars*. However, the expansion dimension of “public sphere” was too little to success.

#### **3.1 Openness and Equality**

As long as the art is concerned, *The Scholars* is most conspicuously characteristic of “the novel hasn’t main plot which just drive the actions of the characters. When the characters came, the stories started; when they left, the stories ends. It was a lengthy novel but similar to short stories in the structure.”[4]Zhou Jin, Fan Jin, Yan Jiansheng, Kuang Chaoren, Du Shenqing, even variety of characters in Nan Jing, wove into a huge and complex relationship web. [5] Though the narration of the text happened in small collective, the end of the previous scenario was connected the next scenario.Subtle things spread with an open attitude which offering the Uncle Tai ancestral hall sacrifices to the climax, and offering the four crackpots to dispel. These stories whic“similar to short stories in the structure” constituted a huge framework. And

this framework concealed the figure of “public sphere”. On one hand, “public sphere” is a space with openness. The complex relationship carries its own openness in the form. It could be proved by the Uncle Tai ancestral gathering people who lived apart. On the other hand, openness also included “the open of the substance”. “Public sphere” required to be listen, but the main discourse will permit no objection in traditional autocracy. Wu Jinzi recorded the acts and the discussion in his most effort, from all manner of people, either the real scholars or the false celebrity. All their speaks were delivered and spread. Not only the sympathy for the pupil Fan Jin and the stair to the officer Fan Jin from Wu Jinzi; but also the stairs to Du Shaoqing from the other characters, thoroughly exhibited the desire to be listen. However, there were too far away from the openness of “Public sphere”. Neither the narrative subjects nor the gentry literati, they can’t receive others’ opinion, or can’t amend their viewpoint.

When the characters amended their views, it based on the equal difference of the identity. Then it concerned the equality of “Public sphere”. The realization of the equality achieved by the rational degree. The rational degree of the Chinese gentry literati based on Confucius school. The words and the deeds of gentry literati in *The Scholars*, such as Wang Yuhui, Du Shaoqing, or Zhou Jin etc... Always showed the images of the intellectual influenced by Confucius school. To these characters, the Confucianism is the rational way to think about the world, which exactly was the root of the logos can’t be survive. The logos had no way to cast off the control of the authority. “Public sphere doesn’t consider about status completely, rather than preset the equal position.”[6] “Public sphere” got its own figure that point to the gentry literati. But need attention, the Confucianism upheld by the gentry literati, built the authority by the feudal power. There is no possible to break the limit of the feudal power. The text of *The Scholars* diffused the atmosphere of falsification and toady. For example, Yan Gongsheng is a typical character who always brags to the strangers and toady to the superiors that led to all sorts of ugly acts. During the trivial things, the form of openness and the substance of equality dispelled with noting left.

### **3.2 Private and Meet**

There was a contrary topic between public and private. “Public sphere” required to admit and respect private. Private involved the individual and the intimate domain. The intimate domain was the foundation because of love and freedom. There were many brother couples such as two Yan, Two Lou, two Du, two Yu, father-son couples such as Hui Wang and dutiful son Guo, father-daughter couples such as Mr Lu and Miss Lu. These relationship implied an expectation--- filled the discourse space according to the link of family relationship. The exist of love and freedom became the origin to enter the space which made the possibility of the realization of logos and equality. The couple of Yu Chi and Yu Te was a really good example. Yu Te was wanted by the office because of involved cheating. His brother Yu Chi helped him to avoid the capture by the same appearance. The case was still respectable under the condition that Yu Chi was innocent. However, the economic factors and the blind pursuit to the power

destroyed the intimate domain. Take Two Yan brothers for example. Yan Gongsheng fell into abnormal state cause of the most desire to money. He ignored his brother Yan Jiansheng's corpse when he took his mind to grab Yan Jiansheng's property. At the same time, Kuang Chaoren cheated everywhere instead of caring his parents. These acts total destruct "the intimate domain of private sphere".

The gather of the private of the individual construct meet. It could be seen the contact between the individuals. For example, Lou Ben, Lou Zan and Yang Zhizhong, Kuang Chaoren and Pan Ziyue etc... The relationship between them mixed the economic factors obviously. These people usually encroached on the interests out of selfish. In the ancient, meet can't happen in bigger regions as lacking of media. Therefore, the gentry literati played an very important role in the case. The expression mode of ancient Chinese special public sphere was limited by the gathering and face to face spread. The gathering is meet on the form. What's more, meet included the attitude and the effort. The efforts mean the attempt to talk with the other side. There are filled with the aspirations that try to communication in *The Scholars*. Not Only reflected on the form of meet, but also the efforts from the individuals. The Uncle Tai ancestral gathering was the biggest meet in the novel. The novel try to save the bad public morals according to the memory of the scholars of the past. Many characters showed their efforts. Take Xiao Yunxian for example, he suppressed the rebellion, governed borderland, so that the people live and work in peace under his rule. However, his efforts couldn't be admitted. Once he tried, failed by the limit of identity, power and culture level. The Uncle Tai ancestral was still in the dilapidated screen. Xiao Yunxian lost his office position. In private, the economic factors played the function that destroyed the private sphere rather than construct "public sphere". In public, there were too many shackles on the space. Therefore, it's still no hope to make "public sphere".

### **3.3 Legality and Authority**

"Public opinion is the idea of public, which debates by private rationally and meet by focusing& integrating that represented the introspection and transformation. Public opinion had an aura authority of criterion." [7]The gentry literati in *The Scholars* presented the phenomenon of binary oppositions. Obviously there were some characters be praised while others were despised. These attitudes were just public opinion that integrated by the narrator. The narrator showed public opinion by integrating the characters debates and acts. As Du Shaoqing for example, the critic on him that proved the irrationally of common people, while the wise man Chi Ziheng said, "Mr. Gao was obviously running Shaoqing down just now, yet he actually showed our friend off to great advantage. From ancient times till now, gentlemen, here have been very few men as remarkable as Shaoqing." [8] These words made us realized despondently that it can't be common sense what held by the rational persons. Public opinion didn't represent common sense what hasn't been influenced by commercialization and systematization, so that it couldn't come into common sense which was unqualified.

Legality also related to the ration of China and public authority. Public opinion and authority met the requirement of the principle of China---Tao. The national government order of ancient China built on the foundation of the traditional Confucian orthodoxy. The Confucian orthodoxy transform to the national government order and realized by the national authority. It resulted in the situation that the legal got entangled with the authority. Public opinion is conform to the Chinese legal what mean the traditional ration rather than the authority. This is a complicate topic when the demand of the legal concerned to the authority,“about the power, and point to the power,but not lean on the power.” [8] Obviously the legal and the authority were bound to conflict. Take Zhuang Shaoguang as a failed example in this situation.

He was called to Beijing filled with hope as the symbol of public opinion and the authority. Not yet Zhuang started his attempt for the emperor, he was reduced to his hometown because of the officialdom intrigues and partisanship complication. Once didn't identified by the official circles objectively, Zhuang lost his enthusiasm subjectively. It was extravagant hopes that the literati who belief in Confucianism tried to show public opinion by the authority. Even more tragic, the wrongful phenomenon that public opinion was controlled. The opinion of the officers and the gentry literati who carried on misdeeds got the support of the ordinary people. The wrongful acts imitated by the ordinary people. From the angle of the different legal and the dislocation authority, the possibility in *The Scholars* that built public sphere was less to the point of non-existence.

#### **4. REFLECTION**

The feudal political system of China did not allow the emergence of "public sphere" whose factors were pregnant by the development of the society. Although the growth factors what got natural deformities were difficult to mature, Wu Jingzi who was the Chinese intellectual tried again and again to built “public sphere” that operated coordination by the gentry with the center and common people. However, he became unable to exhibit the truth under his pen,and defeated by the reality.

The exploration in *The Scholars* expressed the gentry literati's yearning and thinking of the discourse construction. The gentry literati in *The Scholars* not only couldn't help the king, but also couldn't set qualified examples to the ordinary people, even not mention benefit the villager. They showed the endless wandering state. Some of them attempt to find a way out in this turmoil,but were no refuge at last. The fame and the wise were awareness and aversion of disorder society, but they couldn't break through by by faith and culture means. Because of the destruction of the state machine and the extrusion from the state machine, the gentry literati who should be the social elite either be bad moral quality,or be hollow and shallow, or be unable/unwilling to play their ability.

In brief, there were the shackles of the feudal political system and the objective limitations of the gentry literati that lead the weakness of them to Chinese public sphere. Numerous voices circling over the culture couldn't support the formation of the special sphere. Chinese public

sphere not only based on but also point to nothingness, with no results, therefore *The Scholars* had to ended with “Four strangers”. The calling of the construction of the ideal “public sphere” faded, with “The red sun was gradually sinking behind the mountains.”

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This paper was sponsored by Hubei Polytechnic University’s Research Project: The Research between Neo-Confucianism and the literature thought&creation of Song Lian(16xjr01R); based on Hubei Polytechnic University’s Teaching Reform Key Project, The teaching method of Chinese language and Literature Innovation and practice of Universities under the background of the application of Internet plus (2016C21); based on Hubei Polytechnic University’s Communist Youth League Project: The Countermeasure and Innovation of the propaganda work of the communist youth league in the application type colleges and universities under the micro platform background (2017TW12).

## **REFERENCES**

- [1] Jürgen Habermas, “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere”, Translated by Thomas Berger: Derk Corporation, fifth printing, 1993. P48
- [2][3][6][7] Xu Jinlin, “The Chinese Modern Intellectual and the Public Sphere ”, Jiang Su People PR, 2000.6, 1, P17-78.
- [4] Lu Xun, “The General History of the Chinese novels”, Shanghai Ancient books Publishing Press, 1998, 1, 1: P156.
- [5][8][9] Wu Jinzi, “The Scholars”, Hunan People’s Publishing House, Foreigner Language Press, 1999, 1, 1. P1-P817.