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The Dragon Imagery in Chinese Satirical Fiction: A Study of *The Scholars* and Late Qing Novels of Exposure

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Abstract

Since ancient times, interpretations of the dragon image in China have followed two distinct yet intertwined paths: one official and one popular. As seen in *The Scholars* and the late Qing novels of exposure, the dragon is often used to refer to officials and objects associated with imperial power. At the same time, because holding office required a high level of cultural attainment, those likened to dragons were also expected to possess considerable scholarly refinement. Satirical depictions of dragons in everyday life reveal just how deeply embedded the dragon image was in traditional Chinese society. Moreover, the distinctive nature of satirical fiction enables it to direct irony at the official, imperial-centered version of the dragon. The dragon imagery in *The Scholars* and late Qing condemnatory fiction takes on these characteristics because of the very nature of satirical literature. Rooted in reality, such works inevitably reflect the dragon as it actually existed in society. During the Ming–Qing period, and especially within the examination system, the dragon image was indeed marked by this kind of complexity. Furthermore, it was impossible for imperial power to monopolize the dragon symbol. The dragon inevitably permeated all corners of popular life, beyond the reach of imperial control. This in turn reveals the free, worldly orientation of satirical fiction and its resonance with the early stirrings of enlightenment thought.

Keywords: traditional China; satirical literature; dragon; *The Scholars*; late Qing novels of exposure

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Significance

The dragon is one of the most recognizable emblems of Chinese civilization, having permeated every facet of Chinese culture for thousands of years. Even today, many people instinctively assume that the dragon was inseparably and exclusively tied to imperial authority. This perception is both reductive and one-sided. In reality, the dragon image has ancient origins that long predate the emergence of any centralized empire. Although associations with political authority developed and strengthened in later historical periods, the image has never been restricted to the imperial sphere and has always remained present across all levels of Chinese society.

Satirical works such as *The Scholars* and the late Qing novels of exposure differ from tales of the strange and supernatural or from more formal scholarly writings. As novels of manners, they remain close to everyday life while also adopting a sharply critical stance, particularly toward the literati and officialdom of their time. Given the dragon's strong



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associations with the scholar-official class and with political life, such works inevitably bear the imprint of dragon culture, understood as the web of symbolic associations and social practices that have long surrounded the dragon in Chinese tradition. Examining the dragon in these satirical texts can deepen our understanding of how the dragon was actually perceived in premodern China, what values were attached to it, and can enrich our conceptual framework for studying the dragon image in traditional Chinese culture.

1.2. Literature Review

No studies to date have focused specifically on dragon imagery in *The Scholars* and late Qing novels of exposure, so this review will survey related scholarship. L. Wang (2012) examined the aesthetic of “balanced harmony” in traditional Chinese satire, noting that while the language of such works is accessible, they remain serious in purpose and are marked by a “mild manner with sharp satire”—a phrase Lu Xun used to characterize *The Scholars*, but also one that applies to other satirical works. Guan (2023) explored the deeper cultural implications of *The Scholars*, arguing that the novel subtly directs its criticism at the founding Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, and by extension at imperial power itself, thus striking at the heart of autocratic rule. H. Li (2023) showed that *The Scholars* responds to early enlightenment currents, reflecting a popular, secular ideal of freedom and equality. Zhao (2022) discussed how late Qing novels of exposure used focal objects to construct characters and convey ideas. In the field of dragon studies, Ji (2020) systematically examined the mysterious link between emperors and dragons, showing that the identification of the emperor with the dragon began as early as the Qin–Han period and lasted until the end of imperial rule, a phenomenon closely tied to Chinese dragon-worship customs. W. Liu (2023) studied the role of dragon culture in consolidating imperial authority, pointing to the legacy of ancient political ideas and the worship of natural forces. In addition to historical and political analyses of dragon symbolism, art historical scholarship has examined the visual and material dimensions of dragon imagery across Chinese painting, ceramics, jade carving, and architectural decoration. Exhibition catalogues and studies of dynastic art have documented both the official iconography and popular circulation of dragon motifs, providing visual parallels to the textual representations analyzed in satirical fiction (Y. Li 2019).

Western scholarship has likewise engaged extensively with *The Scholars* and the broader symbolism of the dragon in Chinese culture, although a focused examination of dragon imagery within satirical fiction remains underexplored. Shang (2003) offers a comprehensive analysis of *Rulin waishi* (*The Scholars*) as a site of cultural transformation, emphasizing Wu Jingzi’s critique of literati ritual practices and the novel’s negotiation between Confucian ideals and social realities. Similarly, Ropp (1981) situates the work within discourses of dissent in early modern China, highlighting its subtle challenge to Qing intellectual orthodoxy. Hsia (1968), in his foundational study of the classic Chinese novel, underscores *The Scholars*’ pioneering role in satirical realism and its exposure of examination-system hypocrisies. On the dragon symbol itself, classic Western studies such as Hayes (1922) trace its evolution from mythical creature to imperial emblem and popular cultural motif, while more recent cross-cultural comparisons (Y. Liu 2015; Yuan and Sun 2021) examined the dragon’s dual sacred–secular dimensions and its divergence from Western dragon imagery. These international perspectives affirm the novel’s enduring relevance to questions of power, identity, and cultural symbolism, yet they have not systematically addressed how satirical literature repurposes dragon imagery to ironize official discourse. The present study thus seeks to bridge this gap by integrating textual analysis with the dual official–popular trajectories of the dragon in Ming–Qing society.

From this review, it is clear that *The Scholars* and late Qing novels of exposure possess profound cultural significance and critical intent. They often employ indirect, nuanced expression to mock various aspects of reality, including imperial power, while advancing a popular and secular vision of freedom. Meanwhile, for over two millennia, the dragon was consistently associated with the throne and served as a cultural instrument for reinforcing imperial rule. A study of dragon imagery in *The Scholars* and late Qing novels of exposure is therefore both feasible and necessary.

2. Two Faces of the Dragon Image

Before turning to the dragon in *The Scholars* and late Qing novels of exposure, it is worth briefly outlining the two divergent strands of dragon imagery in traditional culture. Broadly speaking, the official discourse sought to emphasize the dragon's sacred association with imperial power, whereas popular culture stressed the dragon's human-like qualities (Luo 1990). From the Han through to the Wei and Jin dynasties, while the dragon continued to maintain strong associations with imperial authority, it also began to acquire additional secular and personalized dimensions, frequently applied to talented literati as a marker of exceptional ability (Gong 2021). *A New Account of the Tales of the World* refers to numerous scholars as dragons, illustrating the symbol's secularization and personification during this period, which paved the way for its deeper penetration into popular life (Z. Wang 2021). This trend continued long afterward; by the Southern Song, the dragon was firmly embedded in folk culture, most often used to denote virtuous and talented literati or similar figures and in descriptions of everyday scenes (Pang 2021).

It should be noted that the distinction between the “official” and “popular” dimensions of the dragon is employed here as a broad analytical framework rather than a rigid binary. In this study, the “official” dragon primarily refers to associations with state power, governmental authority, and imperial symbolism, while the “popular” dragon encompasses its role as a traditional spiritual symbol and a marker of personal virtue or talent independent of official status. These two dimensions frequently overlap, and the same usage may carry both official and popular connotations to varying degrees depending on context. The framework is therefore intended to highlight tendencies and intersections rather than to assign each instance to one exclusive category.

However, this downward diffusion did not mean that the dragon became entirely detached from politics. On the one hand, the imperial state actively sought to associate the dragon with the throne through nomenclature, ritual regulation, and political propaganda. These efforts, while not always fully successful in monopolizing the symbol, nevertheless contributed significantly to shaping elite understandings of the dragon in official and literary discourse. On the other hand, traditional Chinese literati were almost always involved in politics in some way. Even before the civil service examination system existed, scholars might participate in governance through various channels—think of Zhuge Liang, styled “Crouching Dragon”. After the examinations were established, the connection between scholars and politics grew even tighter; literati wholly divorced from political life became a minority. Even those famed for their reclusive, free-spirited ways often had some official experience. Thus, the dragon continued to be applied to various political figures, while many items connected to the court also received dragon names—for example, ambergris (“dragon's spittle fragrance”), used primarily by the imperial household and noble families. The complex identity of the literati ensured that official and popular interpretations of the dragon remained intertwined, a phenomenon vividly displayed in traditional satirical fiction.

This framework becomes particularly productive for understanding satirical fiction when we consider the social position of its producers and readers. In Ming–Qing China,

male literacy rates are estimated to have been roughly between thirty and forty-five percent at most, with female literacy significantly lower (Rawski 1979). Satirical novels such as *The Scholars* were therefore written by and primarily circulated among members of the educated elite—the very scholar-official class that also staffed the imperial bureaucracy. This creates an important tension: although these works frequently depict “popular” or everyday uses of the dragon, these representations are still mediated through an elite consciousness. The satire often arises from the internal contradictions within this elite class itself.

3. The Dragon in *The Scholars*

Since 1915, *The Scholars* has attracted increasing scholarly attention and garnered high praise. The year 1915 was a pivotal year for *The Scholars*, as it began to appear frequently in various histories of Chinese literature. This was closely related to the initiation and development of the study of chapter novels, the emergence and rise of the New Culture Movement, and the further flourishing of research on *The Scholars*. Prior to this, most of the various compilations of the history of Chinese literature has neglected *The Scholars*. Lu Kanru and Feng Yuanjun, for instance, deemed it “ten thousand times superior to other satirical novels”, and Xie Wuliang hailed it as “the progenitor of satirical fiction” (Qin 2015). Although a work of fiction, *The Scholars* is highly realistic, with many characters and episodes based on actual prototypes. It thus offers an excellent starting point for examining dragon imagery in traditional Chinese satire. Dragons appear in over twenty of the novel’s fifty-odd chapters. While the references vary, they can be roughly divided into those pertaining to people and those pertaining to objects.

The examples discussed in this section were identified through a comprehensive search of all passages containing dragon-related terms in the novel. Priority was given to including a range of different contexts and functions, while repetitive mentions of the same phenomenon (such as repeated references to dragon lantern festivities) were generally omitted to avoid redundancy.

3.1. Dragons Associated with People

The first chapter of *The Scholars* mentions dragons twice, both times in reference to people. First, Zhai the buyer tells the magistrate that Wang Mian is not at home and suggests that “His Honor’s dragon carriage might rest a while at the residence while I go summon him again” (老爷龙驾到公馆里略坐一坐，小的再去传) (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 5). Second, an observer remarks that a certain Zhu, Prince of Wu, “truly has the look of a dragon and phoenix” (真有龙凤之表) (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 7). The term “dragon carriage” (龙驾) originally referred to the conveyance of an immortal or the Son of Heaven, or to the emperor himself (Zhang 2020). Here, however, it is applied to a mere county magistrate, a world apart from the throne. Yet the magistrate makes no objection to such address, suggesting that it was a fairly common usage. This illustrates the intermingling of the two interpretations of the dragon. Calling a magistrate a “dragon” represents a descent from imperial heights, yet the magistrate’s authority is entirely derived from the emperor. As the saying goes, “Imperial power stops at the county seat”; thus the magistrate was the lowest tangible extension of imperial authority, the only representative of the throne most commoners ever encountered. The second dragon reference in Chapter One also points to the imperial connection: the “Zhu, Prince of Wu” is none other than the future Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang, though he has not yet declared himself emperor. In sum, while the dragon image did indeed diffuse downward, it remained intimately linked to imperial power. Here, the dragon descends from the divine realm to the Son of Heaven via the notion of divine

right, and then further down to the county magistrate through the delegation of imperial authority, as seen in *The Scholars*.

In Chapter Three, Examiner Zhou encourages Fan Jin with the classical allusion “the dragon’s head belongs to the mature” (龙头属老成), promising him future success and saying he will await him in the capital (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 18). The allusion refers to Liang Hao, who supposedly earned the *zhuangyuan* degree at age eighty-two. Fan Jin has only just passed the county exam, yet he receives such praise; clearly, the “dragon” here stems from Examiner Zhou’s recognition of his literary talent. However, Zhou’s subsequent mention of “success” and “awaiting in the capital” hints at Fan Jin’s future official career. Thus, the dragon here is not a pure marker of cultural refinement but a blend of official prospects and personal accomplishment, further evidence of the composite nature of the dragon image after its downward spread.

In Chapter Seven, dragons appear twice in reference to people (with one instance echoed in Chapter Eight). Wang the secretary receives an oracle from Lord Guan: “I thought a fine steed would clear the path; instead, heavenly office brings Kui and Long (dragon)” (只道骅骝开道，原来天府夔龙) (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 51). The planchette interpreter Chen Li explains “Kui and Long of the Heavenly Court” (天府夔龙) as a prediction that Wang will rise to the rank of Grand Councilor, to Wang’s great delight. This expression primarily alludes to two ministers who served the Sage King Shun. Kui was in charge of music and ritual while Long served as an adviser. It therefore evokes the prospect of rising to high ministerial office close to the throne. At the same time, because one of the names is Long, that is, dragon, and because Kui has long been linked with dragon-like forms in traditional decorative patterns, the phrase also belongs to the dragon imagery surrounding officials in the novel. Wang indeed enjoys successive promotions, eventually becoming a circuit intendant, and later discovers a plaque inscribed “Kui and Long of the Heavenly Court” in an official residence. Though the novel does not specify who formerly owned the residence, it was clearly a high-ranking provincial official. Notably, both Chen Li’s interpretation and the “Kui and Long” allusion itself originally refer to ministers serving directly at the emperor’s side. Yet Wang’s postings and the former occupant of the residence are officials stationed far from the capital. This echoes the earlier use of “dragon” for a county magistrate, reflecting how the dragon symbol spread along with the delegation of imperial authority and underscoring its enduring political dimension.

While Chapter One uses “dragon” for the Son of Heaven, the second reference in Chapter Seven applies it to a deity. After Wang’s divination, Xun the secretary also seeks an oracle but receives no response. Chen Li explains, “I imagine His Holiness’s dragon carriage has already returned to Heaven; we dare not profane it further” (想是夫子龙驾已经回天，不可以再褻渎) (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 51). This shows that even though the scope of “dragon” has broadened, the term can still denote a deity; its original meaning has not been lost.

In Chapter Forty-Nine, Senior Secretary Gao quotes Zhuang Shaoguang’s assessment of Ma Chunshang: “Ma Chunshang knows only how to advance, not how to retreat—he is truly a tiny *kang long* (dragon)” (马纯上知进而不知退，直是一条小小的亢龙) (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 332). Gao then adds his own comment: “That Mr. Ma cannot be compared to a *kang long*” (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 332). The term *kang long* (亢龙) comes from the *Book of Changes* and refers to someone who soars too high without a firm foundation, hence “there is regret” (Ge et al. 2019). This image is generally understood as a warning against excessive ambition and the inability to retreat at the proper moment. Later usage of the term often retained this critical or even pejorative nuance, frequently applied to individuals perceived as headstrong or overly assertive. At the same time, because it remains a reference to a dragon, the term also retains a certain elevated quality, making its application in the

novel particularly ambivalent. Ma Chunshang is a pedantic scholar who wants both genuine learning and official success; he almost sanctifies the eight-legged essay yet ends up with nothing. For this, Zhuang Shaoguang calls him a *kang* dragon—an assessment Senior Secretary Gao rejects. The difference lies in the two men’s values. Zhuang Shaoguang is one of the novel’s few positive figures, a “true Confucian”. Though gifted, he does not seek office. He sees in Ma a genuine, if misguided, pursuit of learning (Ma mistakes exam essays for real scholarship), and thus deems him a *kang* dragon—his spirit is worthy of the dragon designation, but he lacks a solid foundation. Senior Secretary Gao, in contrast, is morally bankrupt, given to empty boasting, devoid of scholarly substance. For Gao, the civil service examinations are the only legitimate path; a failure like Ma has no claim to the dragon label at all, even a negative one.

These two judgments reveal divergent criteria for recognizing a “dragon”. For Zhuang, the standard is the pursuit of learning—a spiritual yardstick rather than a measure of actual achievement. For Gao, the standard is tangible success. One values scholarship, the other values rank; one looks at spirit, the other looks at outcomes. The former’s dragon is closer to the earlier, literati-centered image; the latter’s is closer to the dragon entangled with imperial power. Yet in *The Scholars*, characters like Gao far outnumber those like Zhuang, as reflected in the novel’s many dragon references linked to officialdom.

Not all dragon references in the novel are of this kind, however. Some describe a person’s external demeanor. In Chapter Forty-Five, Tang Santan says of Squire Peng’s household: “The whole family are dragon-eyed and tiger-glaring sorts; only the Third Old Master is a man of true virtue” (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 304). “Dragon-eyed and tiger-glaring” (龙睁虎眼) is pejorative, describing the other family members as overbearing and aggressive, emphasizing the dragon’s raw power. In Chapter Fifty-Six, the Wanli Emperor’s eyes are called “dragon eyes” (龙目) (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 373). Though the context is ironic, it confirms that even in satirical fiction, the dragon retains its original association with the sovereign. In general, when the dragon describes a person’s appearance, it is not always positive, but the person described invariably possesses some degree of power—from Zhu Yuanzhang’s “dragon and phoenix visage” to the “dragon-eyed and tiger-glaring” local bully. The dragon in premodern China was always a figure of superior status relative to the common people, a characteristic that even its downward diffusion could not erase.

3.2. Dragons Associated with Objects

Dragons also appear in connection with various objects in *The Scholars*. Chapter Two mentions “dragon lantern festivities” (闹龙灯) (Jingzi Wu 2009, pp. 9–10). Ostensibly a popular celebration, this event becomes a pretext for local strongmen like Headman Xia and Squire Xun to extort money. Given the dragon’s sacred and political overtones, large-scale dragon-related activities were unlikely to be purely spontaneous folk events; they inevitably bore the imprint of official will—and thus offered opportunities for local powerholders to line their own pockets.

The novel also features smaller dragon-adorned items, such as dragon-headed canes (龙头拐杖). In Chapter Fourteen, when Ma Chunshang first meets the immortal-impersonator Hong Hanxian, the latter appears leaning on a dragon-headed cane (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 100). In Chapter Twenty-Four, Old Master Huang enters the teahouse leaning on a dragon-headed cane to meet Bao Wenqing and Huang Mazi (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 166). A common thread links the two: Hong claims to be over three hundred years old, while Huang states he is eighty-two—a considerable age in premodern China. The dragon-headed cane seems associated with longevity, perhaps due to the dragon’s status as a divine beast. At the same time, neither character holds high rank, yet both wield

dragon-headed canes, demonstrating how pervasive dragon culture was in Chinese society and that dragon-related objects were by no means exclusive to emperors and nobles.

In Chapter Forty-Two, Sixth Master Tang boasts that the Elder Master “had twenty large red satin banners embroidered with dragons made in Nanjing (在南京做了二十首大红缎子绣龙的旗). When the frost sacrifice is offered in the ninth month, His Majesty will act as Grand General and our Elder Master as Vice-General” (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 284). Here, the dragon is unequivocally tied to imperial authority, a clear symbol of the throne. Later in the same chapter, the examination compound’s “Dragon Gate” (龙门) is mentioned (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 286)—the name of the second or third gate in the exam halls, further illustrating the complex entanglement of the dragon with both literati and imperial power.

Chapter Thirty-Five notes that when the emperor holds court, ambergris (“dragon’s spittle fragrance”, 龙涎香) is burned (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 248). This rare and precious substance, named after the dragon and affordable only to the emperor, testifies to the persistent efforts of the imperial state to link the dragon with the sovereign—even in the Ming–Qing period, long after the dragon image had spread far beyond the court.

4. The Dragon in Late Qing Novels of Exposure

Lu Xun observed that late Qing works such as *Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades* and *The Bureaucrats* “resemble satirical fiction” but are “coarse in tone, lacking subtlety, and often exaggerated to excess”. He thus categorized them as “novels of exposure” to distinguish them from works like *The Scholars*. Broadly speaking, however, both categories “aim to set the world right” and can be considered satirical literature (Tang 1994). Moreover, these late Qing novels of exposure were heavily influenced by *The Scholars* (Jun Wu 2018), inheriting much in terms of narrative technique, description, and satirical intent. Thus, although dragons appear less frequently in them, they still offer glimpses into the dragon image of the period.

4.1. Dragons as Metaphors for People

The Bureaucrats contains relatively few dragon-as-person metaphors, but one notable instance occurs in Chapter Twenty-Eight: “When the court received the memorial, the dragon heart was greatly angered” (朝廷得奏，龙心大怒) (B. Li 2013, p. 286). Here, the dragon clearly denotes the emperor, paralleling the usage of “dragon eyes” in *The Scholars*. Strikingly, both instances carry satirical undertones. In *The Scholars*, before mentioning the “dragon eyes”, the text states that “the empire had long been at peace”, only to immediately add, “yet every province suffered from floods and droughts, and refugees filled the roads” (Jingzi Wu 2009, p. 373). The apparent honorific “dragon eyes” thus mocks the Wanli Emperor’s neglect of governance and his willful ignorance of memorials from provincial officials, his belief that “all is peaceful under Heaven”. In *The Bureaucrats*, the emperor’s “dragon heart” anger does lead to the punishment of General Shu, who had embezzled military funds and falsified battle reports—but only because “by chance” there happened to be a governor-general who was “energetic, shrewd, and unafraid of giving offense” (B. Li 2013, p. 286). Had that fortuitous circumstance not occurred, the matter would likely have been smoothed over. The “dragon heart’s anger” would have been ineffectual. In short, whether “dragon eyes” or “dragon heart”, such terms, when encountered in satirical fiction, are used primarily for ironic effect. The emperor and court appear frequently in these novels, but dragon-based references to them are few and far between.

Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades contains one of its most sustained and ironic treatments of dragon imagery in connection with imperial legitimacy. In a lengthy episode, a swindler convinces a wealthy merchant named Zhang that his daughter is fated to become an empress and that an uneducated woodcutter is the true emperor.

Throughout the deception, the swindler repeatedly invokes the traditional belief that “In general, when a true dragon is born, there is no fixed place” (大凡真龙降生，没有一定之地), and “When a true-ordained Son of Heaven comes into the world, a dragon is born in the heavens” (一个真命天子出世，天上便生了一条龙), using it as supernatural proof to validate the woodcutter’s supposed mandate (Jianren Wu 2004, pp. 461–62). He even stages fake celestial signs by burning pine resin at night to create the illusion of dragon light and further convince the merchant. What makes the satire particularly sharp is that this episode contains nearly all the novel’s references linking the dragon to emperorship. Elsewhere in the work, the emperor and court are seldom described through dragon imagery, rendering this fraudulent appropriation all the more conspicuous. The dragon here functions not as a symbol of genuine authority or moral worth, but as a rhetorical device that can be fabricated and exploited for personal gain. The merchant, driven by greed and the desire to become the emperor’s father-in-law, willingly suspends disbelief, while the woodcutter himself gradually begins to act the part by donning dragon robes and issuing imperial pronouncements. Through this extended farce, the novel exposes how traditional cosmological beliefs surrounding the dragon could be cynically manipulated in a time of social disorder.

A contrasting treatment of dragon imagery appears in another episode of the same novel. When the narrator visits a military camp in Tianjin, he witnesses the formal reception of the “Golden Dragon Four Great Kings” (金龙四大王), a river deity whose cult had received extensive state patronage since the Ming dynasty. During the Longqing reign, the deity was officially conferred the title and became a central figure in the Ming–Qing canal and Yellow River god system. In the Qing period, the court continued to accumulate honors upon it; by the mid-Qing, its full title had grown to an extraordinary length, reading “显佑通济昭灵效顺广利安民惠孚普运护国孚泽绥疆敷仁保康赞翊宣诚灵感辅化襄猷溥靖德庇锡祐金龙四大王”. Despite these grand official titles, which far exceeded those granted to Confucius, the novel depicts the deity as a small snake placed on a lacquered tray and worshipped with elaborate but ultimately theatrical rituals. Soldiers and officials treat it with apparent reverence, and one soldier even claims to be possessed by it, in order to rebuke Li Hongzhang. The narrator, however, remains openly skeptical, viewing the entire affair as absurd superstition. The satire here is directed at the human participants and the ritual’s performative nature rather than at the sacred status of the deity. This episode reveals that dragon imagery in late Qing satirical fiction does not follow a uniform trajectory of degradation. While it can be cynically stripped of meaning and turned into a device of fraud, as seen in the “true emperor” scheme, it can also retain a residual institutional and ritual authority backed by centuries of state recognition. The coexistence of these two modes within a single novel suggests that the dragon’s traditional association with power and legitimacy had become deeply unstable during the late Qing, caught between official promotion and popular skepticism.

4.2. Dragons as References to Objects

The use of dragons to denote objects in these two novels largely follows earlier patterns—for example, the examination “Dragon Gate” or the more commonplace “dragon and phoenix lanterns” (龙凤灯笼) used in official settings. Such references all reflect the dragon’s ties to those in power. A more revealing example appears in Chapter Forty-Six of *The Bureaucrats*. The character Tong Ziliang, a senior and highly conservative official in the Ministry of Revenue, embodies the resistance of traditional bureaucrats to late Qing reforms. When he first hears that the court plans to mint Chinese dragon silver dollars (龙圆), he strongly opposes the measure, viewing it as “using barbarians to change China” and fearing that it will eventually turn the country into “a world belonging to foreigners”.

However, his attitude shifts noticeably when he learns that the new coin bears the image of a dragon. Upon hearing this, he grows curious and even asks his student to show him a sample. This brief moment of interest reveals that, for Tong Ziliang, the dragon still carries a certain symbolic weight as a marker of Chinese identity. Yet his curiosity quickly turns to rejection once he notices the foreign writing on the coin. He refuses to use it, insisting that the presence of foreign script has already compromised its Chinese character (B. Li 2013, p. 502). This episode highlights the awkward and contradictory position of dragon imagery in the late Qing period. While the Qing government attempts to repurpose the dragon as a national symbol on currency to assert sovereignty and resist foreign economic influence, even traditionally minded officials like Tong Ziliang cannot fully embrace it when it is entangled with modern administrative practices and foreign elements. As a result, its symbolic authority appears increasingly uncertain and contested.

A similar tension surrounding dragon imagery can also be seen in another episode from *The Bureaucrats*. When the Chinese minister and his family stay in a foreign legation, the minister's wife washes the family's clothes and hangs them out of the window to dry because of limited indoor space. Among the laundry are trousers, socks, foot-binding cloths, and square foot cloths, which hang directly beside the national dragon flag (龙旗). Foreigners passing by mistake the combination of laundry and the dragon flag for some kind of ceremonial display, and the incident soon appears in local newspapers. The minister and his wife, however, remain unaware and continue their usual way of life. This scene further illustrates the awkward position of dragon imagery during the late Qing. Although the dragon flag is intended to symbolize national sovereignty and dignity abroad, its authority is subtly compromised when it is placed alongside everyday domestic items, including those associated with practices increasingly viewed as outdated. The resulting image is one of unintended incongruity rather than solemn national representation. In contrast to *The Scholars*, where dragon imagery is largely tied to the examination system, official status, and literati ambition within a relatively stable traditional framework, the dragon in late Qing satirical fiction is drawn into more complex and often compromising contexts. Whether appearing on currency as part of economic reform or displayed as a national emblem in diplomatic settings, it frequently finds itself entangled with forces that challenge its traditional resonance.

5. Interpretations and Divergences in Dragon Imagery

5.1. Differences Between the Dragon of Satirical Fiction and the Official Dragon

An examination of the dragon in these works shows that although the symbol had long since loosened its exclusive tie to the throne and acquired secular dimensions, the close link between the civil service examinations and the literati meant that the dragon retained a dual nature: it connoted both power and cultural refinement. To be sure, a few figures like Zhuang Shaoguang still judged whether a person could be deemed a “dragon” by spiritual criteria, but they were a small minority. For most people, the dragon remained tied to officialdom and the examination system—precisely what they themselves pursued, and an accurate reflection of Ming–Qing social realities. Given these novels' satirical stance toward official and examination culture, this ambiguity may actually serve their critical purposes.

In passages where the dragon refers solely to the emperor, satirical fiction often adopts a dismissive, ironic tone. This suggests that the authors envisioned a dragon closer to the traditional popular ideal: an embodiment of talent, wisdom, and moral character. The imperial attempt to appropriate the dragon was bound to draw their censure. In contrast, when the dragon appears as a deity, it is not satirized, indicating that the authors still held a certain reverence for the original, sacred dragon—a marked difference from their

treatment of imperial claims. The exception appears in the Golden Dragon Four Great Kings episode, where the narrator's skepticism targets the theatrical performance of the officials and soldiers rather than the deity itself. At the same time, the many dragon-related objects that populate these novels—from official dragon-and-phoenix lanterns to everyday dragon-headed canes—make plain the dragon's pervasive influence on Chinese culture. The imperial state, however, remained keenly aware of the dragon's symbolic value for its own legitimacy; hence its efforts to control the “dragon lantern” festivities, the minting of the “dragon dollar”, and the naming of items like ambergris for use at court. As previous scholarship has noted, the dragon on the official level consistently represented imperial authority. Allowing dragon culture to develop unchecked, relinquishing official control over the symbol, would have risked exposing the throne to questioning, direct attack, or outright rejection.

5.2. *The Values Embodied in Dragon Imagery*

As noted in the literature review, satirical fiction is characterized by mildness with underlying sharpness, criticism of imperial power, worldly freedom, and an enlightenment spirit. These traits collectively shape the complex portrayal of the dragon in these works. Because the novels are grounded in reality rather than fantasy, their dragons must reflect real-world dragons, which were themselves shaped by the interplay of imperial and popular forces. The divergent aspirations of the literati further complicate the picture: some sought rank and wealth, some pursued spiritual ideals, and many desired both, or were uncertain what they truly wanted, or pretended for various reasons to value cultural refinement above all else. Yet behind these façades, the authors' targets and ideals are clear: the dragon of worldly ambition is satirized, while the dragon of spiritual striving is celebrated. The authors deplore the literati's obsession with office and affirm those who refuse to compromise.

At the same time, the dragon, though originating in imperial symbolism, is not confined to the throne; it attaches to a wide range of power-related figures. Given the feudal state's character—“aloof yet omnipresent”—this is hardly surprising. From high court officials and the emperor himself down to middling provincial officers and local “squires”, the entire hierarchy bore the stamp of imperial authority, even if ordinary people encountered only its lower and middle tiers. Thus, individuals far removed from the emperor in rank might still be likened to dragons, though such comparisons in the text are seldom positive. The authors clearly disapprove of these social realities, and here, the subtle enlightenment impulse of these works becomes visible.

In the many instances where dragons denote objects, the satirical novels' worldly, free-spirited orientation is on full display. Dragon-adorned items might seem the emperor's exclusive preserve, but the dragon predates imperial power by millennia and had long permeated popular life too thoroughly for any emperor to monopolize. Hence, dragons appear everywhere in the folk realm—even a charlatan can carry a dragon-headed cane. Moreover, the official attempt to control the popular “dragon lantern” festivities, which merely turned them into a means for local gentry to fleece the populace, reveals the authors' displeasure at state meddling with popular dragon customs. Such control, they imply, is inevitably distorted and can never truly suppress popular uses and interpretations of the dragon. Tong Ziliang's reaction to the “dragon dollar” further shows that the dragon's ties to Chinese culture run deeper than its links to the throne. The coin attracted attention not because the emperor ordered it struck, but because it bore a dragon image—a telling detail. Elsewhere, we see that the emperor, though also a “dragon”, can be deceived and fooled, and may be incapable of distinguishing right from wrong; his association with the dragon symbol does not automatically command popular allegiance. In contrast, the dragon as a

cultural emblem enjoys a more natural connection to Chinese civilization. Its roots lie in ancient myth, yet in popular discourse and practice, it exhibits a freedom that the remote, awe-inspiring imperial dragon lacks. This is the true, free, worldly dragon, and it is this dragon, more than the imperial one, that has secured popular recognition.

6. Conclusions

The varied dragon imagery in traditional Chinese satirical fiction reveals the complex interweaving of official and popular interpretations of the dragon in premodern China. It also demonstrates how deeply embedded the dragon was in Chinese culture and gives voice to the ancients' dissatisfaction with mediocre rulers who styled themselves dragons, as well as to their ideal of the dragon as wise and talented. Whether applied to people or to objects, these satirical works use innuendo and irony to express disdain for feudal autocracy and the civil service examination system while affirming a worldly, free-spirited dragon rooted in popular life. The imperial state tried through nomenclature, control of activities, and political propaganda to bind the dragon symbol to itself. These efforts were not without effect, contributing to the dragon's complex social meanings. Yet the people maintained their own understanding of the dragon. It is precisely for this reason that more than a century after the collapse of imperial rule, the dragon still possesses vigorous life, shining with its own distinctive brilliance as a vital component of Chinese culture.

Beyond its resonance with early enlightenment thought during the Ming–Qing transition, *The Scholars* also contributed to a longer trajectory of critical reflection in modern China. As H. Li (2023), former president of the Chinese The Scholars Society, has shown, the novel's engagement with early enlightenment currents, manifested in its critique of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian rigidity, its affirmation of individual autonomy and worldly values, and its exploration of spiritual liberation, reflects the intellectual atmosphere shaped by the left wing of Wang Yangming's school, Huang Zongxi, Gu Yanwu, Wang Fuzhi, and the Yan-Li school. While late Qing novels of exposure are generally coarser in tone and less subtle than *The Scholars*, they nevertheless inherit and extend its critical spirit in their exposure of social corruption and moral decay. More significantly, the satirical mode and secular orientation pioneered in *The Scholars* provided an important literary and intellectual resource for later modern writers. Dong (2020) has demonstrated how Lu Xun's conception of the "satirical novel" was deeply shaped by his reading of *The Scholars*, and how this influence informed his own exploration of secular dilemmas and intellectual compromise in the early twentieth century. In this sense, the dragon imagery in *The Scholars*, marked by ironic detachment from exclusive imperial authority and its diffusion into everyday social life, not only captures the early stirrings of enlightenment thought but also participates in a broader historical process through which satirical literature continued to serve as a vehicle for critical consciousness in modern China.

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