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A Hong Kong Scholar's Troubled Identity in Dorothy Tse's *Owlish*

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ABSTRACT

Owlish is a part realist, part surreal tale of a disgruntled professor in Hong Kong's fictional double, Nevers, who unexpectedly falls in love with a ballerina doll. The novel's plot unfolds against the backdrop of the growing pressure on Hong Kong's freedom and its very identity resulting in protests—events veiled by Dorothy Tse's inventive language but still unmistakable. This essay approaches *Owlish* as an academic novel—that is, a literary work concerned with university professors and the vicissitudes of their lives within and outside the campus walls. The novel's protagonist, Professor Q, appears to be a brilliant and cosmopolitan intellectual, yet within, he grapples with conflicting identities, mirroring the predicaments faced by Hong Kong itself. This essay examines the portrayal of the scholar in *Owlish* and compares it with similar portrayals by PRC and Sinophone writers. In doing so, this essay traces the various traits that construct the Hong Kong scholar's troubled identity as a traditional Chinese literatus, a renaissance-esque free-spirited thinker, and an overloaded contemporary academic. Elaine Showalter observes that the best works of the academic fiction genre do not merely recount academic routine but boldly play with generic conventions and comment on pressing contemporary issues. Accordingly, this essay emphasises how the Hong Kong professor's identity crisis reflects the precarious state of the city's intellectual sphere and considers the troubling outcome of identity erosion that Tse warns against in her academic narrative.

KEYWORDS: *Owlish*, Dorothy Tse, Hong Kong literature, Sinophone literature, academic fiction, literary fiction

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“At half-a-century old, all Professor Q wanted was a love affair, a proper love affair, for once in his life.”¹ Hong Kong writer and professor Dorothy Tse’s 謝曉虹 debut novel *Yingtoumao yu yinyuexiang de nvhai* 鷹頭貓與音樂相的女孩 [*Owlsh and a Music Box Girl*]—*Owlsh* in Natascha Bruce’s English translation—tells the story of a professor who rebels against the dullness of life by falling in love with a mechanical ballerina doll. *Owlsh* has drawn extensive attention from readers worldwide and has received rave reviews from numerous well-known periodicals.² Novels that unfold in a university setting and portray professors constitute a distinctive literary genre called campus or academic fiction.³ This genre boasts a long-lasting tradition in British, North American, and Anglophone literature and predominantly features English departments and their faculty members. *Owlsh* also centers on a professor of Valerian 為利亞 [English] literature but is written in Chinese and set in the fictional city of Nevers 陌根地, a stand-in for Hong Kong.⁴ *Owlsh* is not the only academic novel that has recently emerged on the Sinophone literary stage. Several contemporary literary works by mainland Chinese authors include scholars and universities in their scope. Notable examples are Yan Lianke’s 閻連科 highly controversial *Feng, ya, song* 風雅頌 [*Ballads, Hymns, Odes*], a poignant satire aimed at intellectuals, and *Ying Wu xiong* 應物兄 [Brother Ying Wu], Li Er’s 李洱sweeping portrayal of academic circles in the contemporary PRC. Talking about this literary genre in Hong Kong literature, one is bound to think of Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞, also known by his pen-name Ya Si 也斯, a prominent professor whose prose often features academics.⁵ However, *Owlsh* is the first full-length academic novel by a Hong Kong writer and a rare example of such fiction in Chinese that has joined the global genre discussion thanks to Bruce’s timely and vivid translation. However, the book’s many reviews are almost exclusively concerned with the parallels that *Owlsh* draws with Hong Kong’s recent political and social crisis, when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to protest the infamous national security law. The city’s turbulent present and indeterminate future are indeed among the novel’s central themes. Nonetheless, the image of the troubled scholar that connects Tse’s work with the global academic fiction genre and with the long tradition of Chinese literati novels is another crucial subject that should not be taken at face value.

In this essay, I focus on the protagonist’s image as an important milestone for intellectual representation, which is one of the governing themes in both modern and premodern Chinese and

¹ Dorothy Tse, *Owlsh: A Novel*, trans. by Natascha Bruce (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2023), e-book edition.

² See, for instance, Kit Fan, ‘Owlsh by Dorothy Tse review – an anti-fairytale’, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/feb/22/owlsh-by-dorothy-tse-review-an-anti-fairytale> [accessed 20 July 2023]; Louisa Lim, ‘“Owlsh” Is a Darkly Fantastical Parable About Totalitarianism’, *The New York Times*, 6 June 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/06/books/owlsh-dorothy-tse.html> [accessed 20 July 2023]; Katy Waldman, ‘The Perils and Potential of the Runaway Imagination’, *The New Yorker*, 5 June 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/06/12/owlsh-dorothy-tse-book-review> [accessed 20 June 2023].

³ For a snapshot of the genre’s development process and present state, see Jeffrey J. Williams, ‘The Rise of the Academic Novel’, *American Literary History* 24:3 (2012), 1–29.

⁴ *Owlsh*’s plot unfolds in its own fictional world. Its geography largely mirrors reality, but the majority of toponyms are invented by Tse and then translated figuratively rather than literally by Bruce. In this essay, I follow the invented terminology but provide in brackets, where necessary, the actual place or entity on which the fictional one is based.

⁵ See, for instance, Leung Ping-kwan 也斯, ‘Xunlu zai Jingdu’ 尋路在京都 [Wanderings in Kyoto], in *Houzhimin shiwu yu aiqing* 後殖民食物與愛情 [Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 23–45, and Leung, ‘Xixiang meiyang’ 西廂魅影 [Phantom of the Western Wing], *Houzhimin*, pp. 66–82.

Sinophone literature. By juxtaposing and comparing the troubled identities of fictional scholars portrayed by Mainland Chinese, Hong Kong-Chinese, Singapore, and American authors, I explore Dorothy Tse's depiction of the protagonist Professor Q in *Owlsh*, especially his multifaceted relationship with the traditional literati moral code, state and institutional powers, and human desires. This essay focuses on how the interplay of these factors shapes a Hong Kong scholar's unique and conflicted identity and in what outcome this inner conflict can result.

1. The dominance of the literati identity in PRC academic narratives

Although Sinophone narratives featuring universities and professors have yet to achieve the attention their Anglo-American counterparts enjoy, the vast potential of this genre is evident. First, Chinese classical literature's long-lasting tradition of literati fiction as well as late Qing and Republican-period scholar narratives find their immediate successor in works of contemporary Sinophone academic fiction. Like its precursors, this genre satirises supposedly immaculate learned people and uncovers the nature of their relationships with the state and society. These are perennial topics of literary works in Chinese concerned with intellectuals. In light of the globally frequent phenomenon of various actors' infringement on academic freedoms, addressing the issue of the state and academia's complicated relationship is urgent.⁶ Besides, the globalization and bureaucratisation of higher education has brought together scholars from all over the world but has simultaneously set them worlds apart. The standard model of the neoliberal university, interacting with various national cultures and traditions of education as well as sociopolitical factors, produces a plethora of new questions and problems while still having to respond to old ones.⁷ These two large areas of inquiry naturally have the persona of the scholar at their intersection—both as an intellectual struggling to maintain their integrity under pressure from the state and society and as a cog in the “Academia Inc.” machine that must keep the whole enterprise going at any cost. Although the problems that academic fiction strives to draw attention to are significant, the genre's narrow constraints—mirroring the cloistered campus—pose a pressing challenge to the writer.

Many scholars and readers have complained that such works are repetitive and predictable carbon copies of each other.⁸ Paradoxically, Sally Dalton-Brown, while somewhat acknowledging this problem, sees academic fiction as overcoming its limitations by shedding some of its signature conventions.⁹ Elaine Showalter similarly sees experimentation and willingness to comment (even using

⁶ For a glimpse of authoritarian governments' recent crackdown on academic freedoms, see *Academia at risk*, *Nature Human Behaviour* 7 (2023), 1–2.

⁷ For an example, see Meaghan Morris, Mette Hjort, 'Introduction: Instituting Cultural Studies', in *Creativity and Academic Activism*, ed. by Meaghan Morris and Mette Hjort (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), pp. 1–20 (pp. 4–6).

⁸ For an assessment of criticism concerning English-language academic fiction, see, for instance, Robert Scott, 'It's a Small World, After All: Assessing the Contemporary Campus Novel', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 37:1 (2004), 81–87. For a critique of Chinese-language university-themed fiction, see Lei Ming 雷鳴, Zhao Jiawen 趙家文, 'Xiaofei wenhua yu 20 shiji 90 niandai yilai daxue ticaixiaoshuo de xushi chenggui' 消費文化與20世紀90年代以來大學題材小說的敘事成規 [Consumer Culture and Established Narrative Rules of the 20th Century 90's Onwards' University-themed Fiction], *Wenyi piping*, 1 (2014), 56–62.

⁹ Sally Dalton-Brown, 'Is There Life Outside of (the Genre of) the Campus Novel? The Academic Struggles to Find a Place in Today's World', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 41:4 (2008), 591–600 (p. 592).

satire) on contemporary issues as a prerequisite for producing an outstanding academic novel.¹⁰ This seems to be accurate, as the genre's widely celebrated works like David Lodge's *Nice Work*, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, or Joseph Coetzee's *Disgrace* are not focused exclusively on teaching, research, or intra-institutional relationships with a pinch of after-hours personal drama or comedy. Notable works of academic fiction written in Chinese follow the same logic: while choosing academia and scholars as a main topic, they do not limit themselves to any strict genre framework, and they experiment boldly. Along with Yan Lianke's *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, which was highly controversial because of its poignant satire targeting intellectuals, and *Brother Ying Wu*, Li Er's sweeping portrayal of academic circles in the contemporary PRC, *Owlsh* is a major milestone in the recent development of academic fiction in the Sinosphere. All three works construct the modern professor's identity but are not spatially or topically confined to the university campus.

The two works penned by mainland Chinese authors are principally focused on the relationship between scholars and the state, which has constituted an integral part of the literati identity since the early times of Imperial China.¹¹ In Yan's novel, the protagonist flees a highly oppressive academic institution (uncoincidentally located in a fictional stand-in for Beijing, a centre of the PRC's political power) and tries to recover his identity by returning to his native village. In Li Er's monumental two-volume work, a provincial university falls in with local political and business elites to carry out an over-ambitious project without drawing the attention of the central government. In addition to the metropolitan university, *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* portrays provincial brothels and ancient ruins, while *Brother Ying Wu* traverses China and even the world. Evidently, two works of Chinese academic fiction reach far beyond the campus in any sense. Yet they somewhat differ in their treatment of the genre's central theme: scholars and th academia.

David Wang, in his discussion of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, mentions that contemporary Chinese fiction about scholars takes after either the late Qing acerbic novel *Guanchang xianxing ji* 官場現形記 [*The Bureaucrats*] by Li Baojia 李寶嘉 (1867–1906) or Qian Zhongshu's 錢種書 (1910–1998) witty masterpiece *Weicheng* 圍城 [*Fortress Besieged*].¹² Indeed, *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* is a biting and somewhat sombre satire, while *Brother Ying Wu* masks profound thoughts behind the veil of humorous episodes featuring scores of ridiculous characters within and outside academia. Yet one aspect shared by the two works allows us to treat them as more or less similar master narratives. The protagonists in Yan's and Li's works—Yang Ke 楊科 and Ying Wu 應物, respectively—are firmly embedded in the *longue duree* of Chinese literati tradition, with their core identity remaining relatively stable throughout the novels. Yang and Ying, both scholars of Chinese Classics (*Shijing* 詩經 [*Book of Poetry*] and *Lunyu* 論語 [*Analects*]), unwaveringly (although with mixed results) uphold the traditional literati's lofty moral standards. The protagonists' images also reflect the recurring behavioral patterns and attitudes common

¹⁰ Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 4.

¹¹ Ge Liangyan, *The Scholar and the State: Fiction as Political Discourse in Late Imperial China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), p. 12.

¹² David Der-wei Wang 王德威, "Shijing' de taowang — Yan Lianke de Fengyasong' 《詩經》的逃亡——閻連科的《風雅頌》" [Shijing Escape – Yan Lianke's *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*], *Dangdai zuojia pinglun*, 1 (2009), 80–84 (p. 80).

among the Confucian literati.¹³ Both strive to appear submissive to their superiors and social norms, to respect and take pride in the historical past and cultural tradition, and to be non-competitive, non-violent, and morally fastidious. However, when these ideals clash with reality, whether external challenges or internal desires, Yang Ke and Ying Wu resort to drastic measures to maintain their literati identity.

In one of the most bizarre sections of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, Yang Ke orders all of the girls working in a brothel to undress and sit in rows, allowing him to observe their bodies. His long-suppressed sexual desire verging on obsession is evident, but his conduct goes against all that he believes befits a scholar. Thus, the rogue professor comes up with a somewhat ridiculous solution: Yang Ke frames the whole scene as a lecture on *Shijing*, with him playing the role of an intellectual helping a disadvantaged social group. He supposes that he uses the women's nakedness only to write *Shijing* poems directly on their bodies, bringing uneducated youth literally in touch with a great tradition.¹⁴ Unlike Yang Ke, who primarily deals with inner desires, Ying Wu is faced with society challenging his literati identity. A respected scholar of Confucian thought, he sees a new project of the Confucianism Research Center as the fruition of a scholarly utopia. However, Ying Wu witnesses other people involved in this enterprise prioritising personal gain and struggling for power rather than building a literati paradise. His stance is less proactive than that of Yang Ke, as he follows his superiors and deliberately ignores the reality breaking into his imagined world. Even the absurd decision to reorganise the budding Research Center into a dual-branch structure, with the second part being an investment fund, does not seriously threaten Ying Wu's stance.¹⁵ Only at the novel's end does the realisation that the lofty project has nothing to do with scholarship or the preservation of the cultural tradition, and the subsequent disillusionment, catch up with him, resulting in an ideological crisis.

Despite the numerous challenges to their identities, Yang Ke and Ying Wu largely succeed in maintaining their firm footing by holding on to the long-lasting literati tradition and the stable—if restrictive—position of intellectuals and professors in PRC society as custodians of this tradition. In other words, they strive to remain scholars through and through regardless of the changes in their status or environment. They remain unfazed even when plagued by temptations and when indulging in activities inappropriate for a literatus. For instance, Yang Ke adopts a somewhat quixotic stance, interpreting any situation as a scholarly and intellectual quest, as in the example above. Ying Wu, in turn, prefers not to acknowledge the reality of contemporary Chinese academia and society, instead treating the world around him as a Confucian utopia. Cai Rong notes post-Mao Chinese intellectuals' somewhat anticlimactic turn from the deconstruction of subjectivity to the Cartesian Enlightenment humanist model of the rational and self-knowing autonomous individual.¹⁶ In similar ways, the protagonists of Yan's and Li's works continue this trend. They struggle strenuously to maintain the integrity of their singular identity, unwilling to reduce themselves to mere discursive constructs.

¹³ Arthur F. Wright, 'Values, Roles, and Personalities', in *Confucian Personalities*, ed. by Arthur F. Wright and Dennis Twitchett (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 3–23 (p. 8).

¹⁴ Yan Lianke 閻連科, *Feng, ya, song* 風雅頌 [Ballads, Hymns, Odes] (Taipei: Maitian chuban, 2008), pp. 230–53.

¹⁵ Li Er 李洱, *Ying Wu xiong* 應物兄 [Brother Ying Wu] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2020), p. 759.

¹⁶ Rong Cai, *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Honolulu; University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 14.

Yang Ke and Ying Wu are also defined by an agenda of serving the nation, another distinctive trait of traditional humanist literati, expressed best by Fan Zhongyan's 范仲淹 (989–1052) famous phrase, "They were the first to worry the worries of All-under-Heaven, and the last to enjoy its joys" (先天下之憂而憂後天下之樂而樂).¹⁷ They are by no means the perfect sages, but more often than not, their course of action is defined by (or done under the pretense of) putting others before themselves. For instance, without a second thought, Yang Ke leads students whose shabby dormitories have been severely damaged by a sandstorm to protest in front of the university's administrative building.¹⁸ The nation's well-being also drives his scholarly pursuits, as Yang Ke strives to bring the Chinese people spiritual salvation through the rediscovery of the *Shijing*. Finally, after establishing his own utopian commune, he voluntarily takes on all of the organisational work without enjoying any fruits of his labor. Ying Wu likewise pursues his altruistic educational goals. He is an ardent advocate of traditional learning for contemporary society and the only one who sees the Confucianism Research Center not as a sinecure or a lucrative development project but as a seat of scholarship and culture.

Why do these fictional professors put so much trust in the image of traditional literati? Although all of the geographical places and institutions in Yan's and Li's novels are invented—which is a common way for the academic fiction genre to avoid or at least minimise controversy—all of them are located on or in the proximity of the Central Plains, the cradle of Chinese civilisation.¹⁹ In a way, the rock-solid foundation of the physical site and the robust tradition that originated and thrived in this place rendered the literati part of its *genii locorum*. As if disagreeing with Foucault's call for the promotion of new forms of subjectivity by rejecting individuality imposed by history, professors in mainland academic fiction wholeheartedly embrace the traditional literati identity.²⁰ As Cai notes, otherwise-simplistic humanistic discourse has been used effectively by intellectuals to counter Mao's dictatorship and retain some individual freedoms.²¹ It is thus unsurprising that the authority of learned people is so resilient in mainland academic fiction—intellectuals there survived and thrived throughout the countless vicissitudes of history. In the case of Sinophone academic fiction, however, the situation is not so stable.

2. Not (only) a literatus: The multifaceted identity of the fictional Hong Kong scholar

While the traditional image of the literati has a significant influence in PRC academic fiction, in the rest of the Sinosphere, it faces resistance from different histories, from colonial legacies, and from multilingualism and multiculturalism. This tendency is especially evident in the case of Hong Kong. Famously dubbed "a Floating City" by the prominent local writer Xi Xi 西西 (1937–2022), Hong Kong is

¹⁷ Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹, 'Yueyanglou ji' 岳陽樓記 [The Yueyang Tower], https://fanti.dugushici.com/ancient_proses/47517 [accessed 29 June 2023]. English translation is from Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 76.

¹⁸ Yan, *Feng, ya, song*, pp. 87–89.

¹⁹ For an example of the controversy caused by Yan's novel despite the use of fictional substitutes for all geographical names and institutions, see Eric Abrahamsen, 'The book that offended Peking University', *Paper Republic*, 8 October 2008, <https://paper-republic.org/pers/eric-abrahamsen/yan-liankes-newest/> [accessed 26 July 2023].

²⁰ Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (1982), 777–95 (p. 785).

²¹ Rong Cai, *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 19.

indeed an antipode of its northern neighbor, together forming “One Country, Two Systems.”²² Initially a number of unconnected islands, the territory possesses a unique identity oppositional to the mainland’s continuity and systematicity—an archipelagic profile that is anti-essential, unforeseeable, and unpredictable, rejecting every fixed and coherent schema cast upon it.²³ Perhaps only the exceptional adaptability and flexibility granted to Hong Kong by this *modus operandi* enabled it to withstand the turbulent nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as more recent ordeals such as the 2019 protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the floating city remains afloat as a major economic center and a cultural and linguistic melting pot. Throughout the short yet eventful history of Hong Kong, its inhabitants have, to the pride of some and the chagrin of others, irrevocably shaped and embraced their own unique identity, which is quite different from that of mainland Chinese.²⁴ In this vein, upon being transplanted from the solid ground of mainland China to the islands of Hong Kong, the long-lasting literati tradition somewhat loses its footing and becomes a subject of change and even denial. Similarly, Professor Q in *Owlsh* is defined by the attempt to portray the highly controversial and ambiguous identity of the Hong Kong scholar, who deals with numerous factors challenging the magisterial paradigm of the literati tradition. *Owlsh*’s protagonist shares many traits with traditional humanist literati, yet not on the scale of Yang Ke or Ying Wu. As a *literator*, Q does not just struggle with selfish desires or the imperfections of the modern world. Instead, this identity is forced to share Q’s mind with an ensemble of others, including that of a Western-educated scholar, a contemporary academic, and a first-generation immigrant from mainland China.

In *Owlsh*, this combination of diverse and entangled identities, none of them powerful enough to dominate, results in Q developing a split personality. His alternative self embraces everything that does not fit into the Chinese literati’s humanist mold—everything that is subversive, ambiguous, and in flux:

Yes, something like an owl but also not like an owl. How can I put this? Do you know about amphibians? Creatures that are somewhere in between aquatic and terrestrial – from an evolutionary perspective, a kind of transitional species. If an owl is a bird with a head like a cat, perhaps we should say Owlsh is a cat with a head like a bird? To be Owlsh is to be a creature somewhere in between a mammal and a bird. To be Owlsh is to be a bird that can’t fly, at least not at the moment, but who can climb tall trees and pretend to be a bird, borrowing its nest from other birds. For now, that’s what it must do to survive. But who knows what will happen next? Everything is changing.²⁵

Q’s unruly second self seems to emerge in a time of instability and precarity, both for the professor and for the city. When Q is seemingly at his lowest in terms of his career and caught in a midlife crisis, his alter ego Owlsh makes the humble professor’s life take an unexpected turn.

²² Xi Xi, *Marvels of a Floating City and Other Stories*, ed. by Eva Hung, (Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997).

²³ Michael Wiedorn, ‘On the Unfolding of Édouard Glissant’s Archipelagic Thought’, *Karib – Nordic Journal for Caribbean Studies* 6:3 (2021), 1–7 (p.3).

²⁴ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 2.

²⁵ Tse, *Owlsh*.

The novel's artistic profile echoes the gradual process of Owlsh seizing control over Q's life, which results in the exemplary scholar and family man's routine rapidly spiraling into chaos. If *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* and *Brother Ying Wu* are comparable to the realist works *The Bureaucrats* and *Fortress Besieged*, respectively, the traditional literati narrative to which *Owlsh* bears the greatest resemblance is Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 [*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*]. Translator Nicky Harman describes Tse's writing as surreal and partially fantastic tales that are nevertheless effective precisely because they are grounded firmly in reality.²⁶ This definition echoes philosopher Martin Buber's observation that "the order of nature is not ruptured but extended; nothing interferes with the plenitude of life, and everything living carries the seed of the ghostly" in Pu Songling's masterpiece.²⁷ Just like Pu himself and many of his fictional scholars, Q struggles to pass his examinations (in his case, his tenure review), eventually finding himself in a mix of reality and fantasy, unable to tell one from the other. Some scenes, such as Q staying overnight in a Buddhist temple, where boundaries between dream and waking are blurred, can be read as directly inspired by *Strange Tales*.²⁸ Finally, Q is pushed by his alter ego Owlsh headfirst into an affair with a supernatural being—not a fox or a ghost, but a life-size mechanical doll, Aliss 愛麗詩, who miraculously comes to life. The novel grows even more surreal and symbolic toward the end, when Q, preoccupied with his personal drama, is dragged into a whirlpool of protests that change the very nature of the city. Overall, Tse's work grants immense room for interpretation and allegorical readings of the affair between Q and Aliss as reflecting contemporary Hong Kong's identity and the city's complicated relationship with the central power in the mainland. Nonetheless, equally important is another conflict central to this essay, namely how the literati identity, flourishing in realist academic fiction from the PRC, is affected and changed by the multifaceted identity of Nevers, where the surreal and fantastic blend with the mundane.

Professor Q's ambivalence toward the image of the traditional Confucian literatus constitutes the novel's central conflict and is depicted on several planes, including cultural, linguistic, and institutional. The reader is introduced to the protagonist as an amalgamation of all of his controversial identities, unable to discern which is dominant:

And Professor Q? None of them knew anything about his past. He had appeared among them as Maria's husband: a short man with wavy hair always combed from an unsophisticated centre parting. From some angles his skin appeared so dark it was almost blue, like that of the labourers who arrived in Nevers from places further south, while in other lights he looked fair enough to pass as one of the Western colonisers. Even more bewildering was that not only did he speak fluent Southern and Valerian, he also knew languages the rest of them had never even heard of. If any of them enquired about his nationality or place of birth, he would only smile, or glance shyly at Maria and reply with the Ksanese proverb: You marry a cat, you follow the cat. You marry a bird, you follow the bird.²⁹

²⁶ Dorothy Tse, *Snow and Shadow*, trans. by Nicky Harman (Hong Kong: East Slope Publishing Limited, 2014), p. 8.

²⁷ Martin Buber, *Chinese Tales: Zhuangzi, Sayings and Parables and Chinese Ghost and Love Stories*, trans. by Alex Page (Atlantic Highland: Humanities Press International, 1991), p. 10.

²⁸ See Tse, *Owlsh*, chapter 11.

²⁹ Tse, *Owlsh*.

On the surface, such a personality appears perfectly fitting for a Nevers academic whose mastery of both Western and Ksanese 剎南 (Chinese) traditions is even reflected in his physical appearance. The image of a global intellectual is a somewhat frequent sight in the works of academic fiction worldwide. For instance, a protagonist of John L'Heureux's *The Handmaid of Desire*, professor Olga Kominska, a vaguely Eastern European scholar, is elusive in terms of her ethnicity, mother tongue, and origins. Yet throughout the novel, Kominska's character becomes more professionally and ethnically diffused. This development empowers her and even grants her some divine qualities.³⁰ At first glance, Q's case is comparable. His ambiguous and ever-changing personality echoes the stereotypical image of Hong Kong as a world city where East and West meet in a harmonious combination that is impossible anywhere else in the world. It may seem that this professor, unlike his mainland counterparts, has finally complied with Foucault and concentrated on the present time and what he is at this moment.³¹ In other words, he gives up his efforts to (re)discover his (literati) identity of the past, instead adapting and thriving like the city itself. Q's transience and in-betweenness bring to mind Rey Chow's call for a third space for postcolonial Hong Kong, one that allows the city to struggle against the colonial past while not succumbing to the dominant native culture.³² Indeed, it is tempting to explain a Hong Kong scholar's identity as simply being empowered by the city's unique cultural resilience and adaptiveness. However, Tse has revealed that Hong Kong-ness is not among the central themes of her creative work, and that her primary interests lie instead in such topics as transformation, crossing boundaries, and escaping.³³ Indeed, as the novel's plot progresses, Q's initial well-rounded and complete profile shows cracks and eventually crumbles into increasingly small and uneven pieces. That is, Q's sleek appearance as a multicultural intellectual is but a façade behind which languages and identities do not harmonise but constantly struggle against each other. This identity split, which leads to Q's transformation and escape attempt, can be traced back to the professor's childhood. After escaping from Ksana, which fell under the Vanguard Republic's 先鋒共和國's rule, his family had a hard time adjusting to the reality of Nevers. In particular, Q's father, a traditional intellectual himself, tried to ensure that his son had a literati upbringing:

Q was forbidden to roam the streets with other boys his age. He was supposed to stay inside and study. But when he brought home report cards, his father refused even to look up from whatever book he was reading, commenting simply: 'Best to forget what you learn at school.' Every day, Q would speak one language in class, only to come home and be forced to speak another. Sometimes he wished he could say nothing at all, could just crouch down and inspect ant trails all afternoon, but there was no getting around his father's insistence that he learn classical Ksanese poems by rote. His recitations always sounded furious.³⁴

³⁰ Ludmiła Blaim-Gruszevska, 'Academic Fiction and the Professorial Shadowlands: The (Dis)empowerment of Eastern European Scholar', in *The Campus Novel. Regional or Global*, ed. by Dieter Fuchs and Wojciech Klepuszewski (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 49–63 (pp. 61–62).

³¹ Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (1982), 777–95 (p. 785).

³² Rey Chow, *Ethics After Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 157.

³³ Mike Ingham, Christopher Mattison, 'History is Now': Fiction's History and History's Fiction in Recent Representations of Hong Kong's Story—a Dissonant View', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 59 (2019), 214–30 (p. 224).

³⁴ Tse, *Owlsh*.

Presumably using Southern 南方語 [Cantonese] language at school, Q was force-fed Northern 北方語 [Mandarin] and classical Ksanese at home. This Sinophone (or rather Ksanophone) controversy pushed Q to seek solace in yet another language. Valerian was widely spoken in Nevers and seemingly free from the tensions besetting his mother tongue(s). Escaping to the foreigner-frequented bars in the city center, young Q absorbed Valerian speech to take a break from his already splitting identities as a Ksanese literatus and a citizen of Nevers. However, his primary goal appears to be to prove himself to and even to assert some superiority over his father, whose mastery of this foreign language is far from perfect:

Occasionally a meaty hand would reach down to pat him on the head, or someone would praise him extravagantly for his language skills, calling him their little buddy, their pal. In these moments tears sprang to his eyes, and he longed for his father to pass by and witness the scene.³⁵

Thus, from a young age, Q was in the center of the Vanguard–Nevers–Valeria cultural and linguistic triangle-turned-knot, where each language and the ideology behind it constituted his identity. Unsurprisingly, in his institutional life, Q also cannot embrace a singular identity, either of a traditional humanist literatus like Yang Ke or Ying Wu or of a detached and ironic cosmopolitan academic like Olga Kominska.

The institution where Q teaches is another source of controversy. The university is portrayed as the last citadel of traditional learning within the rapidly changing (or perhaps declining) Nevers. Its name, Lone Boat University 孤舟大學, is a reference to a prominent Tang 唐 dynasty literatus Liu Zongyuan's 柳宗元 (773–819) classic poem 'Jiangxue' 江雪 [Snow on the River].³⁶ Liu wrote the poem shortly after being exiled, and this depiction of an old man in a lone boat in the middle of a snowy, desolate landscape conveys loneliness and gloom. Similarly, Lone Boat was established by an exiled literatus, a Confucian scholar who escaped the Vanguard Republic for Nevers. This Confucian, represented by his statue on campus, is a recurring image throughout the novel, always appearing in moments crucial for the novel's plot, such as Q once again being denied tenure, the wake of the student protests, and Q's final Kafkaesque trial in the administrative building.³⁷ Interestingly, Q never experiences any feelings of kinship or solidarity with the founding father as a fellow scholar. On the contrary, the professor is constantly wary and suspicious of the copper Confucian, suspecting that his solid-cast literatus identity, reflected in the institution he established, is but a mask:

Deferential, except that his right eyebrow and the right corner of his mouth twitched upwards, as though barely suppressing a smirk. From time to time, Professor Q would wonder who the Confucian's derision was aimed at. Himself? The people of Nevers? [...]

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元, 'Jiangxue' 江雪 [Snow on the River] https://fanti.dugushici.com/ancient_proses/18048 [accessed 28 July 2023].

³⁷ This character is likely based on Tang Chun-I 唐君毅 (1909–1978). He was a proponent of New Confucianism 新儒學, and after going into exile in Hong Kong, he established the New Asia College 新亞洲學院, seeking to save Chinese traditional culture, which was being persecuted in the communist-ruled mainland. There is a statue of Tang on the Chinese University of Hong Kong campus in Sha Tin 沙田.

His eyes were squinting and unfocused, and there was something unsettling about his expression – he had the face of a vaudeville performer who might, at any moment, reach into his pockets and produce an assortment of juggling balls.³⁸

That face, that smirk – they would never change. The Confucian was with the spirits now, what did he care about the living? How could he possibly understand what it was like for poor, luckless Professor Q? The Confucian had founded the university but it was clear from his expression that he despised it, along with everyone in it.³⁹

Q shows an equal distrust of the Confucian's visage and the institution he is a part of. He sees research, teaching, and administrative duties as dull chores that matter only as stepping stones to tenure. In other words, the humanist ideas and ideals that govern the minds of Q's mainland counterparts Yang Ke and Ying Wu have lost most of their lustre for the Nevers professor. Here, the alternative identity of Owlsh steps up, drastically altering Q's life and offering him an escape from the pressing moral and institutional constraints. It is somewhat expected that a literatus disillusioned with the life of the mind would seek solace in worldly pleasures—another motif in the academic fiction genre. Yet although Q is blasé about the humanist project and traditional morals, Owlsh fails to push him entirely off of his intellectual's life trajectory toward all of the material pleasures that the affluent city of Nevers has to offer. The mental equivalent of a tug-of-war that Q and Owlsh engage in leads to their eventual demise, yet the professor's short-lived rebellion is where the novel offers the greatest insights into a scholar's precarious standing in contemporary Hong Kong.

3. The clash of identities in *Owlsh*: A battle without winners

Why should intelligent people confine themselves to a low-paying, high-load life of teaching and research when life outside the university campus has so much to offer? This is among the central questions in the academic fiction genre worldwide, and academia does not always come out on top. One of the characters in Randall Jarrell's work of academic satire *Pictures from an Institution* states that scholars are but "businessmen who've gone into teaching and got unbusinesslike."⁴⁰ If it is indeed possible for one to become "unbusinesslike" after entering academia, the reverse scenario is also probable. Such a turn of events is portrayed in another Sinophone author's book that presents an interesting contrast with Tse's novel: Singaporean writer Yeng Pway Ngon's 英培安 *Wo yu woziji de ersanshi* 我與我自己的二三事 [*Trivialities About Me and Myself*]. The narrator and protagonist of Yeng's novel, Ah-hui 阿輝, also experiences a kind of split personality, constantly engaging in an inner self-monologue and labeling all his actions and decisions as made either by him (Ah-hui or Me) or by Myself 我自己. Myself has a great deal in common with the quintessential image of the traditional literatus that is so ubiquitous in Chinese-language academic fiction while also bearing some traits of the May Fourth intellectual. He admires the works of Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), classical Chinese poetry, and philosophical treatises, while adhering

³⁸ Tse, *Owlsh*.

³⁹ Tse, *Owlsh*.

⁴⁰ Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), p. 97.

to a strict moral code. During his early and middle years, Ah-hui bickers constantly with Myself, who dreams of pursuing a scholarly career after graduating from Nanyang University's Chinese Department. Eventually, the two personalities strike a compromise and choose journalism as a career that will allow them to write and conduct research while avoiding low wages and the marginal status of a Chinese literature scholar in a rapidly Anglicising Singapore. However, while Ah-hui sees the position of a reporter as a starting point for making useful contacts and moving up in society, Myself treats every report as a scholarly endeavor and contribution to the humanist project. Disagreements between the two personalities reach a tipping point, and Ah-hui, desperately craving material pleasures, casts away Myself and finally starts his dream life as a businessman, bon vivant, and womaniser:

When I started working, Myself was still in student mode and placed righteousness above profits in everything we did. He seemed unaware that we live in a society where money counts more than anything. Would I even be able to survive if I let morality dictate what we did? Myself claimed to be my soul, my inner being. He was right, of course, for he lived in a spiritual world where food was not a concern. But I had to tend to my physical body—I had to eat. But more than that, I wanted to enjoy fine wine and good food, high social status, and tangible power; I liked the idea of driving a big car, living in a mansion, and sleeping with pretty girls.⁴¹

Such a fate befalling a Chinese traditional literatus, an ascetic uprooted from his homeland and fighting an uphill battle against the globalist consumerist dream, is hardly unexpected. However, Q's and Owlsh's standpoints are not polarised to such an extreme as in the case of Myself and Ah-hui. Owlsh offers not only material pleasures but also another way of intellectual life free from institutional pressure and literati morals. John Lyons claims that since the Renaissance, the literary portrait of scholars has consisted of the two interrelated roles of a comic, laughable buffoon and a tragic, Faustian figure.⁴² We can find a parallel with this twofold image in the novel's text: in Q's collection of artworks, his favorite pieces are a statuette of Don Quixote and a woodblock print of Mephistopheles. These two famous literary characters that Q admires match the duality of scholars' literary representation as presented by Lyons. When Owlsh takes the reins and offers Q a secluded love nest in an abandoned church on one of Nevers' outlying islands, his previously tucked-away collection is used to decorate an empty space. The knight-errant and the demon thus become key pieces of a makeshift exhibition:

The professor's Mephistopheles and Don Quixote artworks, along with other pieces previously shoved miserably out of sight, were now proudly displayed on the two carved wooden pulpits, each item protected by a gleaming glass case.⁴³

In a sense, Owlsh offers freedom both from the university's institutional power, resembling Foucauldian pastoral power, and from marital constraints. The former was responsible for denying Q's salvation (that

⁴¹ Yeng Pway Ngon, *Trivialities About Me and Myself*, trans. by Howard Goldblatt (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2014), e-book edition.

⁴² John Lyons, *The College Novel in America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 3.

⁴³ Tse, *Owlsh*.

is, tenure) and the latter for his lack of sexual life.⁴⁴ Q views his wife Maria, particularly her body, as “a shrine, a sealed entity, a church with no door through which to enter.”⁴⁵ Symbolically, the place where Q’s affair with the mechanical ballerina Aliss unfolds is also a church, but this time, the professor is free to enter and exit as he pleases. Using the church as a substitute for the nuptial chamber and the scholar’s studio, Q exercises his long-repressed intellectual and sexual urges over a doll, thus gradually animating it. He also rediscovers his creativity, previously thwarted by the burdens of teaching and paperwork. Instead of producing an endless stream of academic output that makes Q feel like a “cement worker, dumping dry, insipid words into research-paper-shaped mould,” in the church he effortlessly switches between scholarly jottings, prose, and poetry.⁴⁶ At this point, the submissive and restrained literatus is replaced with a somewhat ridiculous yet daring lover and thinker—in a sense, both Quixotic and Faustian.

However, Don Quixote meets his end as Alonso Quijano, while Mephistopheles fails to win Faust’s soul. In the same fashion, Owlsh suddenly retreats, and Q finds himself face-to-face with a grim reality. Q now faces the looming consequences of his short-lived crusade against the dullness of marital and professional life. At some point during his rebellious phase, Q (or perhaps Owlsh, or even neither of them—Tse’s signature surreal writing leaves considerable room for interpretation) plays a prank on the university president. Viewed against the backdrop of the student protests that the infatuated Q failed to notice all along, his mischief gains a dangerously subversive subtext. The life that Q had so much disdain for now becomes the single most vital thing for this suddenly sober professor:

If he lost his job, he would lose everything. Pretty soon, news would get out about the university’s accusations against him, in relation to both the painting and to Aliss. How was he supposed to explain any of this to Maria? [...] It was a path of absolute stupidity, and everyone he had ever known would turn their back on him if he followed it. He would be kicked out of his home, and the stable Nevers life he had built for himself would collapse like a line of dominoes.⁴⁷

Q’s storyline concludes with him being reinstalled firmly into the system he tried unsuccessfully to escape when Owlsh was in control. Obediently cooperating with university and government authorities to redeem himself, Q is rewarded with long-awaited tenure. Ill and weakened after his supernatural affair, like some of Pu Songling’s scholars who crossed paths with a fox or a ghost, he recovers slowly. At the same time, the last vestiges of Owlsh are destroyed by the combined marital and institutional powers. His submissive but morally fastidious literatus identity has been shattered by the romantic and creative scholar-madman, who now is also gone. Concluding the recurring theme of duality in the novel, Q is finally whole. Yet what remains is but an empty shell, “the pretend professor”; “the real professor” who “has ventured boldly into a dream state, an act of rebellion against himself” has disappeared, putting an

⁴⁴ For parallels between pastoral power and politics of tenure, see Aimee Howley, Richard Hartnett, ‘Pastoral Power and the Contemporary University: A Foucauldian Analysis’, *Educational Theory* 42:3 (1992), 271–83 (pp. 280–81).

⁴⁵ Tse, *Owlsh*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Tse, *Owlsh*.

end to Q's lifelong identity crisis.⁴⁸ To some degree mirroring the recent history of Hong Kong, this troubled scholar of Nevers finally attains a moment's peace but loses a significant part of his individuality and intellectual vitality.

4. Conclusion

The image of the literati has been a staple of academic fiction written in Chinese, especially by PRC authors. Either as genuine or as a convenient disguise, the traditional intellectual's identity has defined narratives concerned with professors and universities. However, in the works of Sinophone fiction, the literatus faces multiple challenges. First, the PRC government promotes traditional Chinese culture as a cornerstone of national identity and pride while also taking the position of its rightful custodian. In Hong Kong and Singapore, this cultural heritage, in some sense, is even more potent and deep-rooted because of its continuity, unbroken by events such as the Cultural Revolution, and less affected by the current policies. Yet, it is also tightly intertwined with the colonial past and present self-positioning as inclusive cultural melting pots. Thus, scholars on the (relative) margins of the Sinosphere, while still influenced prominently by the traditional culture, have considerable difficulty establishing and maintaining an unbroken link with countless generations of literati of the past. Concurrently, the lofty humanist project of serving the nation by preserving the classical learning and wisdom that still has significant influence over the largely state-controlled PRC academia has lost a substantial degree of its appeal in the neoliberal corporate-like environment of the global university network. Yet although the traditional literati image has ceased to be the sole example for every scholar, especially those in the humanities, it is far from vanishing, and continues to impinge on their minds. Unsurprisingly, under such circumstances, scholars in Sinophone academic fiction are often faced with an identity crisis. The precarious position of a scholar plagued with a multiplicity of contending yet interconnected identities is vividly depicted in *Owlsh*, the work of academic fiction by Hong Kong writer and professor at Hong Kong Baptist University Dorothy Tse.

Owlsh's protagonist, Professor Q, was brought up as a traditional intellectual but never became one in a full sense. The moralistic and submissive literatus in Q is simultaneously balanced and challenged by another scholarly identity, a polymath and creative writer called Owlsh. This other scholar is equally Quixotic and Faustian, viewing life as a pleasure hunt and a creative endeavor rather than a humanist project while also being appalled by the prospect of being governed by a strict moral code. The climax comes in the form of Owlsh's rebellion: an impossible affair with a lifelike ballerina doll, Aliss, with whom he settles in an abandoned church. Yet the days of defying authorities and indulging with equal passion in creative work and sexual pleasures are limited for Q, and institutional and marital powers forcibly bring him to reality. In the clash between the two identities, neither is victorious, leaving behind an automaton of a professor devoid of any distinctive identity. The doll Aliss, ironically, becomes a living human being.

Unlike realist works of academic fiction by mainland authors that are often compared with *The Bureaucrats* or *Fortress Besieged*, *Owlsh* more closely resembles Pu Songling's *Strange Tales*. The

⁴⁸ Ibid.

narrative, blending fantasy and reality, successfully captures the unpredictable duality of Hong Kong and its scholars. Unsurprisingly, Tse, who holds an academic position herself, excels in the medium of academic fiction. The genre enables her not only to comment on Hong Kong's overall indeterminate future and eroding identity but also to draw attention to the precarious position of universities and the intellectual sphere at large in the city's new reality. *Owlsh* adds an important new layer to the multifaceted relationship between scholars and the state: the seminal theme of academic fiction from the PRC. Tse hints that unlike the protagonists of Yan Lianke's and Li Er's works, who struggle to maintain their traditional literati identity, with its exorbitantly high standards, scholars in Hong Kong risk losing themselves completely, as happens with Professor Q. As rightly noted by Edward Said, the modern university, with all its problems and flaws, is "still one of the few remaining places [...] where reflection and study can take place in an almost-utopian fashion."⁴⁹ *Owlsh* briefly mentions a plan to convert Lone Boat University, somewhat flawed but still a university in the Saidian sense, into a generic and state-controlled "scientific research center," losing both its history and future. In *Owlsh*, this scenario appears fantastic and surreal, but this threat is deeply rooted in reality, and we should view it with all seriousness.

⁴⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. xii.

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