

THE FORMATION OF CHINESE SCHOLARS (SHI) CLASS AND THEIR CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

WU, J.^{1*} – CHONG, Y. Y.²

¹ *Yangpu Foreign Languages School, Hainan Province, China.*

² *College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor, Malaysia.*

**Corresponding author
e-mail: jiaqiwu97[at]foxmail.com*

(Received 24th September 2024; revised 07th December 2024; accepted 15th December 2024)

Abstract. This paper investigates the emergence and evolution of the Chinese scholar-official class (Shi 士), recognized as one of the earliest ideological and intellectual groups in Chinese society. The study examines the gradual formation of this class as a dynamic process shaped by a complex interplay of socio-political, economic, and cultural factors. It emphasizes how historical milestones, such as the establishment of Confucianism as the state ideology and the implementation of institutional systems like the imperial examination, facilitated the expansion and upward mobility of this group. Particular attention is given to the Wei-Jin period, a transformative era that marked a heightened sense of intellectual self-awareness and cultural identity among scholars. By analyzing key shifts in historical contexts and the evolving roles of the scholar-official class, this paper explores how this elite group not only solidified its social standing but also articulated its unique cultural consciousness. Ultimately, the research sheds light on the profound influence of the scholar-official class on Chinese cultural and intellectual history, offering insights into the development of literati traditions and their enduring legacy.

Keywords: *scholar-official class, class mobility, cultural self-awareness, intellectual elite, social hierarchy*

Introduction

The concept of the shi class is highly complex and continuously evolving, encompassing various roles such as official positions, social status, and gender across different historical periods. Its definition shifts in response to significant societal changes, particularly during times of upheaval, such as the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. During these eras of intense political, economic, and military conflict, the collapse of the patriarchal clan system and the hereditary nobility had already become inevitable. Against this backdrop, those at the lower rungs of the ruling class—namely the shi class—underwent substantial changes in both social status and identity. However, on a macro level, this era of transformation created opportunities for social mobility and reorganization, allowing individuals with ability, high cognition, and learning to achieve greater historical prominence and contribute meaningfully to society. The formation and evolution of the shi class in Chinese history represents a complex social phenomenon. It requires disentangling from many preconceived notions of social hierarchy and carefully examining the factors that contributed to its development. Given its complexity, this study focuses on the emergence and formation of the shi class, with particular emphasis on its growing sense of collective identity and self-awareness. The discussion is grounded in cultural and intellectual history, exploring the unique cultural and philosophical character of this class. The central task of the shi class was the transmission and innovation of culture and thought, making it a vital lens through which to understand the distinctive form of Chinese culture. Not merely

administrative officials who advised rulers and managed state affairs, members of the shi class also constructed a transcendent spiritual world based on the concept of the Dao, passing it down through generations and finding fulfillment within it.

From a cultural perspective, broad cultural self-awareness among literati emerged prominently during the Wei-Jin period. Groups such as the “Seven Sages of Jian’an” and the “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove” exemplified this. During this time, cultural industries like music, painting, literature, and calligraphy flourished, reflecting the literati's pursuit of refined tastes, which paralleled the interests of contemporary elites. This period also better reflects the trajectory of Chinese culture and philosophy, laying the foundation for the basic direction of cultural development in China. This paper employs a literature analysis approach, reviewing historical sources to trace the origins and self-awareness of the shi class, revealing the historical trajectory and key factors that influenced the early development of this intellectual group. Additionally, Confucianism and the civil service examination system, which emerged from the Zhou dynasty and became institutionalized in later periods like the Han dynasties, were critical in solidifying the role of the shi class in Chinese society. This study aims to achieve the following objectives: (1) to analyze the historical evolution and defining characteristics of the shi class from its emergence to the Wei-Jin period; (2) to explore the cultural and intellectual contributions of the shi class to Chinese society; (3) to examine the interplay between the shi class's self-awareness and its socio-political context, particularly during periods of instability; as well as (4) to highlight the significance of Confucianism and other philosophical influences in shaping the identity and roles of the shi class.

Literature review

In primitive Chinese society, the term "shi" (士) initially referred to males, as frequently observed in early texts, such as The Book of Songs (《诗经》), where the term was paired with "nü" (女) to indicate gender, with shi representing men. However, in a broader context found in ancient texts and archaeological evidence, "shi" referred to a specific social class possessing certain status and responsibilities. It was a rank in the class structure during China's slave society, extending into the early stages of feudalism. The shi class is believed to have originated from the personal guards of tribal nobles in late primitive society. Archaeological discoveries in the Dahan Kou culture in Shandong provide strong evidence of this. In the late-period tombs, adult male graves were uncovered, where men were found with turtle shells protecting their knees and genital areas, and they were holding hook-shaped tools made from ivory. Archaeologists infer that these men were warriors, likely elite personal guards of noble figures. As society transitioned into more structured class systems, these guards retained their honorary status and evolved into military leaders, whose power was derived from their martial abilities. Over time, they naturally transformed into members of the ruling class known as shi.

During this early period, people were divided into a hierarchical system of ten ranks: kings (wang), dukes (gong), grandees (dafu), shi, and the lower classes, which included slaves and servants. The shi class occupied the middle tier of this pyramid, functioning as lower-ranked slave-owning nobility. Above the shi were high-ranking aristocrats like kings and grandees, while below them were commoners, merchants, and artisans, followed by household slaves who performed various menial tasks (zao, yu, li, liao, pu).

The shi were key members of the “guo” (國, state) and made up a significant portion of the national citizenry (Liu, 1996). Thus, the shi class not only played a significant role in maintaining military and political power but also served as the executive agents of the ruling class, facilitating governance and preserving the state's hierarchical structure. As notes, the shi were crucial to the implementation of the ruling class's authority in early Chinese society, contributing to both military leadership and civil administration. During the Western Zhou period, the shi class emerged as a product of the feudal system, a political institution implemented by the Zhou dynasty's ruling class of slave owners, led by the Zhou king, to consolidate state power. The shi were primarily the younger sons of the aristocratic qing and dafu families. Although they belonged to the nobility, the shi represented the lowest rung of that class (Wang, 1995). They typically held responsibilities in scholarship and education, serving both as officials and teachers. However, as the power of the Zhou king declined and the Zhou dynasty's authority became largely nominal, the shi experienced a turning point in their social status. In the later period of the Zhou dynasty, constant wars erupted between the feudal lords, leading to the collapse of the hierarchical system that had been maintained through patriarchal and kinship ties. This upheaval caused the breakdown of the original social order.

The Spring and Autumn period, lasting from 770 to 476 BC, was a time of significant social and political upheaval in ancient China, following the weakening of the central Zhou Dynasty. Named after the historical Spring and Autumn Annals, this era was marked by the fragmentation of political authority, with local lords gradually assuming power and asserting autonomy over their territories. The era witnessed the rise of regional hegemonies and an increasing focus on military and diplomatic strategies to consolidate influence. Despite the decentralized nature of power, this period was also significant for the cultural and intellectual developments that laid the groundwork for Chinese philosophy, including the emergence of Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism. Amidst the political instability, the shi (士) class—originally lower-level officials and scholars—began to gain social recognition, setting the stage for their later prominence in Chinese governance (Chen, 2010). The Spring and Autumn period eventually gave way to the Warring States period, which further intensified these dynamics. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the turbulent environment forced some defeated aristocrats to flee and seek refuge in different places. As a result, the aristocrats who once held cultural and intellectual power dispersed among the common people, leading to the emergence of the you shi (wandering scholars). This phenomenon marked the initial cultural diffusion to the broader population. These you shi managed to elevate their status through personal effort and ability, becoming "new scholars" in service of the aristocracy. Unlike their predecessors, they were not bound by the old patriarchal system, nor did they share the same kinship ties with the rulers and lords. Instead, a new hierarchical relationship emerged between sovereign and subject, marking the early cross-regional mobility of the shi class. It is important to note that in the early stages, you shi were still primarily concerned with survival and finding a stable place in society, and the concept of independent thought or political ambition had not yet fully developed (later sections will discuss the you shi who possessed political aspirations and independent character).

In this new era, aristocrats employed the "new scholars" through a practice known as *ce ming wei zhi* (“策名委质”) pledging allegiance and offering loyalty to strengthen the

bond of subordination between them. Under this system, once a scholar pledged allegiance to a lord, they were bound by the principle of "not serving two masters." As a result, feudal lords, seeking to enhance their power, began to recruit scholars in great numbers. With the scholars' assistance, they expanded their territories and relied on them to manage their domains. Over time, these scholars assumed key local positions, often overseeing finances or military affairs, which, in turn, invisibly elevated the social standing of the shi class (Wan, 2019). During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the various feudal states engaged in constant warfare. Against this backdrop of political competition and prolonged military conflict, the ruling class placed a significant emphasis on military preparedness and the cultivation of military talent, which took precedence over other state affairs. As a result, the role and training of the shi class were primarily adjusted toward the military. Their education included rites, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics, with the first four subjects being directly related to military skills. Thus, in the early Spring and Autumn Period, the majority of the shi class functioned as warriors. These warriors, with their cultural knowledge and military expertise, defended the slave-based states, contributing significantly to the foundation and expansion of the Shang and Zhou dynasties. However, the prolonged warfare and relentless combat took a toll on the morale of these warriors, greatly diminishing the fighting capacity of the Zhou dynasty's forces. By the late Spring and Autumn Period, the emphasis among the ruling class had shifted increasingly towards civil affairs, leading to a decline in the status of warriors. The idea of "those who excel in learning should become officials" prompted many warriors to seek new roles and careers. Furthermore, the rise of diplomacy highlighted the fact that diplomatic negotiations often yielded greater benefits than military campaigns, and could resolve fierce conflicts of interest through communication rather than costly warfare. This shift led to a growing trend of valuing scholarly pursuits over military prowess (Zhang, 2010).

The Qin Dynasty, lasted from 221 to 206 BC, marking a pivotal transition in Chinese history. This era followed the turbulent Warring States period and culminated in the unification of China under Emperor Qin Shi Huang, the first ruler to centralize power across the vast territory. The Qin Dynasty, though short-lived, was significant for its reforms, including the standardization of weights, measures, currency, and the script. Qin Shi Huang also initiated major infrastructure projects such as the construction of the Great Wall and an extensive road network to solidify control. Regarding the shi class, Qin Shihuang's infamous "burning of books and burying of scholars" severely degraded the status of both Confucianism and the shi, plunging them into a period of hardship and marginalization. During this time, the shi faced significant challenges as their intellectual and societal roles were suppressed under the Qin's authoritarian regime. However, the Qin's harsh rule, coupled with the extreme demands for labor on massive state projects, such as the Great Wall, led to widespread discontent and unrest. This instability, combined with internal power struggles, accelerated the dynasty's rapid downfall, paving the way for the rise of the Han Dynasty, which adopted many of the Qin's reforms but tempered its governance with more lenient policies (Zhou and Zhou, 2009). The dire circumstances faced by the shi class continued until the establishment of the Western Han, when Confucianism and the shi were restored to prominence. The policy of "abolishing the hundred schools and exalting Confucianism alone" sharply contrasted with the Qin's earlier suppression of intellectual thought, significantly

improving the social standing of the shi and leading to notable shifts in their societal role and identity.

The Han period, which includes the Western Han (206 BC-9 AD) and Eastern Han (25-220 AD), marks one of the most significant and enduring dynasties in Chinese history. It followed the collapse of the short-lived Qin Dynasty and established a lasting foundation for Chinese governance, culture, and social structure. The Han Dynasty is notable for consolidating the imperial system introduced by the Qin, but with a more moderate approach to governance. This period saw the expansion of the empire through military campaigns and the opening of the Silk Road, fostering trade and cultural exchange with the West (Li, 2011). The civil service system, heavily influenced by Confucian principles, became a central component in the formation of the scholar-official (士) class, shaping the role of scholars in government and society. Confucianism became the dominant ideology, embedding itself in the education system and solidifying the moral and ethical framework for Chinese society. However, the Han Dynasty also faced internal challenges, including court factionalism, economic difficulties, and peasant uprisings, culminating in the dynasty's division into the Eastern Han and its eventual downfall. The era was essential in shaping the role of scholars as both administrators and moral guides within the imperial framework. By the late Western Han Dynasty, the merging of the shi class with clan structures gave rise to the well-known shizu (scholar-official clans) in Chinese history (Li and Huang, 2022). Prominent clans used their wealth and resources to provide education for their descendants, gradually transforming into shizu. As the shi gained political power, they expanded their family influence, with the success of one member benefiting the entire clan, and failure harming all. The process of shizu formation and the consolidation of wealth turned the shi from wandering scholars (youshi) into shidafu (scholar-officials). During this period, the shi were bound by kinship ties and patriarchal clan obligations, and were not entirely free individuals. Family interests had to be considered before making decisions.

Since the Eastern Han period, shidafu developed a clear distinction from the imperial consorts' relatives and eunuchs. As their group size and status stabilized, they cultivated both collective and individual self-awareness. Individual self-awareness referred to the independent spirit of the person. This could be divided into two parts: external self-awareness, which emphasized one's appearance and refined speech, and internal self-awareness, which focused on cherishing one's life and spirit. Despite disregarding conventional social norms, the shidafu deeply embodied moral principles, achieving a high degree of spiritual freedom centered on the self (Li and Huang, 2022). The Wei and Jin periods, encompassing the era from 220 to 420 AD, cover the end of the Han Dynasty, the Three Kingdoms period, and the establishment of the Western and Eastern Jin Dynasties. This period also extends to the Northern and Southern Dynasties, from 420 to 589 AD, when China experienced significant political fragmentation (Wang, 2011). The emphasis on the state of Wei, rather than Shu or Wu, in the Three Kingdoms period is primarily due to the notable presence of literary and intellectual figures within its territory (Liu, 2015). The Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties were defined by continuous conflict and regime changes, with over 30 dynasties rising and falling over 360 years, profoundly reshaping the social and cultural fabric of Chinese society (Zhang, 2014; Chen, 2013). This tumultuous era witnessed the transformation of traditional societal structures and the increasing prominence of the shi (士) class as both a political and intellectual force (Zhou, 2016).

The emergence of the Three Kingdoms provided scholars and intellectuals with the opportunity to choose a ruler who aligned with their personal ideals and ambitions, reminiscent of the "wandering scholars" (You Shi) of the Warring States period. However, unlike their predecessors, the scholars (Shi) of this era displayed a greater degree of independence in both thought and action. They also exercised more agency in the selection of their patron or ruler. During this time, the social order was relatively stable, the economy prosperous, and the people generally lived in peace and security. As a result, the scholar class no longer felt the responsibility to uphold the world or maintain social order. Thus, they shifted away from active political engagement, focusing instead on the pursuit of personal spiritual freedom and inner liberation. The scholars of this period prioritized individual freedom over collective order, breaking away from traditional Confucian moral constraints. This led to the emergence of a hedonistic cultural atmosphere, exemplified by the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, who became famous for their indulgence in nature, poetry, and carefree, unrestrained behavior. During this time, scholars contributed more to cultural and social life, while their involvement in state governance and political affairs was comparatively minimal. The self-awareness of intellectuals during the Wei and Jin periods is reflected in the rise of literary groups such as the "Seven Masters of Jian'an," the "Virtuous Men of the Zhengshi Era," and the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove." In the Wei and Jin dynasties, the philosophy of the "Three Metaphysical Texts" (Yi, Lao, Zhuang) replaced the Confucian classics that had dominated the Han dynasty. The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, with their distinctive traits and behaviors, epitomized the scholar class of the Wei and Jin periods. Each of these individuals was also a prominent figure in the philosophical school of Wei-Jin Neo-Taoism.

The "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove" refers to the seven prominent intellectuals of the Wei-Jin period: Shan Tao, Ruan Ji, Liu Ling, Ji Kang, Xiang Xiu, Ruan Xian, and Wang Rong (*Figure 1*). In the Book of Jin (Jinshu), the biography of Ruan Ji describes this time as one where "Amid the turmoil between Wei and Jin, few of the intellectual elite survived unscathed." The chaotic political environment and instability during the Three Kingdoms and Wei-Jin periods deeply affected society. Contemporary scholar and professor of philosophy at Peking University, Zong Baihua, observes that "The late Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties were the most chaotic in Chinese political history and the most painful for society, yet they were also the most liberated and free in spirit, rich in wisdom and intense in passion" (On the Aesthetics of the Book of Wei and Jin Intellectuals). Despite living in a deceitful and treacherous environment, the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove resisted through their own unique methods, steadfast in their life beliefs and moral pursuits. Their spirit of resistance has been celebrated throughout history. The complex political landscape of the Wei and Jin periods left both the court and the common people in a state of unease. Faced with an uncertain future and fear for their lives, many intellectuals retreated to the mountains and forests, giving rise to what became known as the "Wei-Jin demeanor" (Wei Jin fengdu). Also referred to as the "Wei-Jin elegance" or "Wei-Jin integrity," this term encapsulates the life philosophy and aesthetic ideals embraced by the scholars of the time. It represents a distinctive set of behaviors and attitudes unlike those of any previous historical period, with the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove standing as the most iconic representatives of this demeanor.

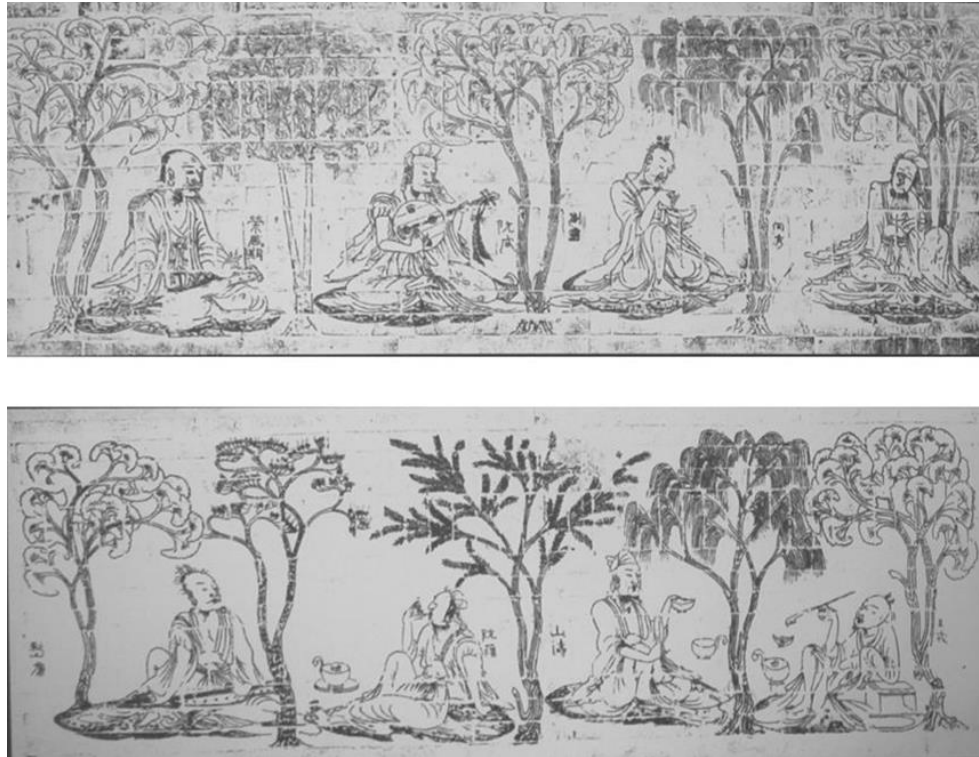


Figure 1. Photograph of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, a group of Chinese Taoist scholars, writers, and musicians (Ruan Ji, Ji Kang, Shan Tao, Xiang Xiu, Liu Ling, Wang Rong, Ruan Xian).

During the political transitions of the Wei and Jin dynasties, the Sima clan, upon consolidating their initial power, began eliminating dissenters and tightening control over the political landscape. Many former officials of the Cao Wei regime, fearing the Sima family's dominance, chose to align themselves with the new rulers. In contrast, the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove," renowned scholars of the same period, retreated to the mountains, embracing the Daoist philosophy of reverence for nature. They refused to collaborate with the Sima regime in any form, embodying a spirit of rebellion by adhering to the "Dao" and resisting authoritarian rule. Their steadfastness in upholding their moral principles and their self-consistent approach to life have left an enduring legacy of admiration for future generations. In fact, the so-called "Wei-Jin demeanor" was, to some extent, a response to the harsh realities of the time. The brutal political environment shattered the Confucian ideals of "governing the country and bringing peace to the world," which had traditionally motivated the literati. In Confucian culture, which emphasizes active engagement in public affairs, most intellectuals longed for political achievement, and the Seven Sages were no exception, many harboring grand ambitions to serve society. However, political pressure pervaded every aspect of life, and their outward display of hedonism and unconventional behavior was, in fact, a reflection of their resistance to the Sima regime and their inner commitment to personal beliefs (Long, 2023). Ultimately, the influence of the Seven Sages and their refusal to cooperate with the Sima regime led to their eventual dissolution. If the Sima court was the external force that caused their downfall, then the internal divisions in political attitudes and philosophical leanings were the decisive internal factors that led to their differing fates. Ruan Ji, Liu Ling, Ji Kang, and Ruan Xian adhered to the Daoist principle of "transcending social norms and following nature," while Shan Tao and

Wang Rong mixed Daoist thought with Confucian doctrines, and Xiang Xiu advocated for the harmony of social norms and natural law.

In terms of choices, Shan Tao, originally one of the recluses among the Seven Sages, eventually chose to serve the Sima regime at the age of 40, joining Sima Shi and holding positions such as shangshu official, shizhong (attendant at court), and situ (Minister of Education), ultimately becoming a high-ranking official under the Sima clan. Ruan Ji, Liu Ling, and Ji Kang, who had served the Cao Wei regime, remained staunchly opposed to collaborating with the Sima family, which was now poised to usurp power. Ji Kang was eventually executed, Ruan Ji avoided execution by feigning madness while heavily drinking, and Liu Ling chose to withdraw from society entirely. After Ji Kang's death, Xiang Xiu was forced to serve in the government, while Ruan Xian briefly held a position as sanguishi (Gentleman of the Palace) under the Jin dynasty, but did not earn the favor of Emperor Sima Yan. Wang Rong, known for his avarice and ambition, served in prominent positions under both Emperor Wu and Emperor Hui of the Jin dynasty, holding titles such as shizhong and situ. Ultimately, the Seven Sages disbanded. A closer examination of their ideological tendencies and political choices reveals that, even as a collective, their behavior mirrors the deliberations of modern intellectuals. Their self-awareness as a group led to a collective consciousness, but their divergent inner beliefs and pursuits made them keenly aware of their individuality. As a result, they maintained their intellectual independence, despite their outward association with one another.

In summary, the cultural self-awareness of the scholar class during the Wei and Jin periods is discernible through several factors, particularly political environments, intellectual trends, and the behavior of scholars. Political and social upheaval, especially during the transition from the Three Kingdoms to the establishment of the Jin Dynasty, caused widespread instability. Scholars, in response to the political disorder and uncertainty, began to distance themselves from the official ranks, either through withdrawal into seclusion or by focusing on personal spiritual fulfillment (Deng, 2009). This trend marked a shift toward cultural independence. The rise of Neo-Daoism and the increasing popularity of Lao-Zhuang philosophy replaced Confucianism as the guiding intellectual framework, as scholars prioritized personal spirituality and natural law over traditional political engagement. This philosophical turn reflected a growing self-awareness and a conscious break from Confucian orthodoxy (Li, 2011a). Literary groups like the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove" embodied this intellectual and lifestyle transformation, resisting political authority and pursuing personal freedom through their individualism and cultural defiance (Liu and Qian, 2010). The flourishing of literature and art during this period, as seen in the poetry of Jian'an and works like *Shishuo Xinyu*, further underscores this self-conscious shift. Scholars became cultural figures who valued personal expression over political ambition, marking the true beginning of their cultural self-awareness (Chang, 2007).

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a historical research design to examine the formation and self-awareness of the Chinese scholar class (Shi), tracing their development from early Zhou society through the Wei and Jin dynasties. The focus is on the formation and introspection of this social stratum, particularly in the cultural domain. During the literature collection process, a total of 563 related articles on the Shi class were found,

of which 285 were directly relevant. After filtering and analyzing the existing mainstream viewpoints, 50 valuable and directly applicable sources have been identified, ensuring that the internal logic and development of these ideas are clearly delineated. Given the scholarly consensus that the self-reflection of Wei and Jin scholars represents a key moment of cultural consciousness, the historical scope of this study is limited to the Wei and Jin periods and earlier. In order to explore this, primary sources such as The Book of Songs (《诗经》), The Analects, Mencius, Records of the Grand Historian, and various historical decrees will be analyzed to understand the socio-political and cultural roles of the scholar class. Additionally, secondary sources, including scholarly analyses, historical interpretations, and modern commentaries on Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism, will provide critical context. The study will utilize a systematic literature review to integrate existing viewpoints, map out their internal logic, and track their development. Data collection will involve systematically reviewing these texts for recurring themes related to governance, education, and intellectual autonomy. Thematic and textual analysis will be employed to identify patterns in the evolution of the Shi class, and comparative analysis will be used to explore how their roles shifted across different periods. While acknowledging the limitations posed by potential biases in historical texts and incomplete records, this study will mitigate these issues through cross-referencing multiple sources to ensure a balanced interpretation. Ultimately, this approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Shi class's cultural consciousness and their impact on Chinese intellectual and political history.

Results and Discussion

The historical development and self-awareness of the Chinese scholar class (Shi) is a complex and layered phenomenon that evolved over centuries. This study analyzed primary texts such as The Book of Songs, The Analects, Mencius, and Records of the Grand Historian, alongside secondary sources from modern scholarship, to understand the formation and self-consciousness of the Shi class, particularly in the pre-Wei and Jin periods.

Formulation of the Shi class

The concept of the scholar class (Shi) in ancient China has its origins in early historical texts, with its earliest definitions undergoing significant evolution. The term "Shi" can be traced back to references in The Book of Songs, where it originally denoted males of a certain social standing. In the later stages of primitive society, the designation of "Shi" transitioned from individuals associated with nobility—who held specific roles or served as personal guards—to those who played a more central role in the governance of a nascent class society. As class stratification emerged, these individuals began to leverage their intellect and influence to uphold the ruling structure of the slave society. Consequently, they evolved into the dominant ruling class—embodied by the Shi—who were tasked with implementing governance. During the Western Zhou period, under the feudal system, the Shi class gained significant control over academic and educational matters. However, as the dynasty waned and local lords vied for power, the Shi class experienced its first notable fluidity. Many scholars sought patronage from more influential monarchs, and lords increasingly retained Shi to

solidify their control. Despite their increasing numbers and significance, the Shi class had not yet achieved a sense of self-awareness. By the late Spring and Autumn period, there was a noticeable shift in the role of the Shi. With the decrease in direct warfare, strategy and negotiation supplanted the need for martial prowess, prompting a transition from a militaristic to a more culturally refined focus. The educational and cultural sophistication of the Shi class saw substantial improvement, laying the groundwork for future developments.

The contrasting attitudes of the Qin and Han dynasties toward Confucianism resulted in significant fluctuations within the Shi class. By the establishment of the Han dynasty, the Shi class's social status became more stable, and its numbers significantly increased. The Eastern Han period marked the emergence of both collective and individual self-awareness among the Shi. The concept of individual self-awareness can be divided into external and internal dimensions. The external dimension relates to outward appearances and discourse, while the internal dimension emphasizes the appreciation of personal life and spirit. During this period, the Shi's independence and refusal to conform to societal norms fostered a profound sense of inner freedom and centeredness in personal ideology. This awakening of self-awareness in the late Eastern Han led to a situation reminiscent of the fragmentation seen during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. The Shi class began to exhibit a more proactive stance, reflecting a heightened cultural engagement in response to political instability. As the Wei and Jin periods commenced, prolonged warfare subsided, and society experienced relative stability. Economic conditions gradually improved, allowing the populace to recuperate. The role of the Shi class shifted significantly; no longer tasked with upholding societal order, the Shi distanced themselves from political engagement. Instead, they pursued personal spiritual freedom and intellectual liberation. Despite a semblance of stability, the political landscape remained chaotic. The Sima royal family, having usurped power, aimed to consolidate authority and manipulate the political ecosystem, increasingly resorting to authoritarian measures and the elimination of dissent. In this context, a segment of the intellectually conscious Shi maintained their ideals, fostering a spirit of resistance against what they perceived as an illegitimate regime. This led to the formation of cultural groups among like-minded Shi, marking the emergence of a collective consciousness characterized by cultural activity and resistance.

Intellectual autonomy and cultural awareness

The study further highlights that the self-awareness of the Shi class began to solidify during the Warring States period with the Hundred Schools of Thought, but it was not until the Wei and Jin periods that their cultural consciousness fully matured. Scholars during these times became more aware of their autonomy from the state apparatus, seeking intellectual freedom in response to the oppressive political environment. The rise of Neo-Daoism and the philosophical teachings of Lao-Zhuang allowed the Shi to adopt a more independent, personal approach to life, increasingly rejecting the traditional Confucian emphasis on public service and governance (Li, 2011b). This period saw the emergence of cultural elites who were not only scholars but also poets, artists, and philosophers. Groups like the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove epitomized this shift toward individualism and spiritual liberation. They consciously distanced themselves from political power, instead choosing to express their cultural and intellectual autonomy through literary and artistic endeavors (Liu and Qian, 2010).

The shift in political and cultural roles

A key finding is the disillusionment of the Shi class with political power during the late Han and Three Kingdoms period. The instability and corruption in the political sphere led many scholars to retreat from active political participation. While the Confucian ideal of "governing the world" (治国平天下) still held influence, many scholars felt that the moral degeneration of the ruling elites made it impossible to practice their values in the public domain (Deng, 2009). The self-awareness of the Shi was increasingly linked to their cultural roles rather than their political duties. This shift is evident in the way the scholar class embraced reclusion, turning inward to focus on philosophical and spiritual cultivation. The political passivity and intellectual retreat seen in many of these scholars reflected a profound shift in the values of the Shi class during this period. Literary works produced during this time frequently reflect this disillusionment and the rise of a new cultural ethos that prioritized personal integrity over public duty (Li, 2011c).

The interplay between individual ideologies and the collective spirit of the Shi class signified a crucial awakening. Influenced by Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought, the Shi began to engage in cultural practices, such as music and calligraphy, facilitating intellectual exchange while preserving their ideological independence. This period witnessed a remarkable coexistence of conformity in form, as Shi engaged in similar cultural projects, alongside a commitment to maintaining personal ideological distinctiveness. By the time of the Wei and Jin dynasties, the framework of thought and cultural consciousness of the Shi class had been established and entered a phase of stable development. The collective and individual awakening of the Shi during this era not only reflected their historical evolution but also laid the foundation for the distinct cultural identity that would characterize Chinese literati in subsequent periods. The dual forces of individual autonomy and collective identity continue to resonate within the cultural heritage of the Shi class, influencing Chinese intellectual history profoundly.

Comparative reflections

The Spring and Autumn period and the late Eastern Han period experienced similar political turmoil and dynastic changes. By comparing and analyzing the Shi class during these two periods, we can clearly observe the development and transformation of the Shi. The Warring States period was characterized by the Hundred Schools of Thought, where intense philosophical debates among intellectuals and active participation in politics and governance were prominent. In contrast, during the Wei and Jin periods, the Shi adopted a more passive stance in response to the tumultuous political landscape and social context, retaining reservations about political involvement. Behind this behavior lies a selective response brought about by cultural awakening and intellectual independence. When faced with unfavorable social and political conditions, they exhibited behaviors of escapism, distancing themselves from politics and society, coupled with a rebellious spirit. Thus, the Shi of the Wei and Jin periods no longer sought self-realization and self-definition through active engagement in state affairs; instead, they aspired to cultivate themselves through intellectual independence and knowledge, aiming to influence and navigate the complex socio-political environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study indicate that the cultural self-awareness of the Chinese scholar class reached its peak during the Wei and Jin periods, driven by a combination of political instability and philosophical evolution. The shift from political participation to cultural and intellectual expression marked a significant transformation in the role of the Shi class, setting the foundation for the development of literati culture in later periods. This cultural consciousness, shaped by the complex dynamics of governance, intellectual movements, and personal autonomy, remains one of the defining features of Chinese intellectual history. The study reveals that the Shi class's journey was not merely a retreat from politics, but rather an evolution towards a more profound understanding of their identity and purpose within a changing society. This transformation allowed the Shi to redefine their contributions, focusing on the cultivation of individual ideals and cultural practices rather than direct political involvement. The emergence of influential cultural figures and groups, such as the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove," epitomized this shift, emphasizing personal expression through art, literature, and philosophy. Summarizing the early formation and development of the Shi class, we observe distinct periods of stability and breakthrough. In stable periods, such as under a stable political regime, the Shi class focused on increasing its influence and social standing within the existing political framework, with development mainly reflected in the expansion of their scale and status. This development was heavily dependent on the political attitudes and policies of the ruling class, as evidenced by the contrasting political approaches during the Qin and Han dynasties. Conversely, during periods of political upheaval, the established rules were disrupted, providing the Shi class with opportunities to pursue personal ideals and ambitions. Such periods of disruption, as seen during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods as well as the late Eastern Han dynasty, became windows for the awakening of self-awareness among the Shi, leading to more prominent individualism and intellectual independence. The Wei and Jin periods particularly highlight this phenomenon, where many intellectuals maintained their ideological independence even under new political regimes.

Moreover, the interplay between Confucian values and emerging Daoist and Buddhist philosophies fostered a rich intellectual environment, encouraging the Shi class to explore diverse paths of thought and self-cultivation. This diversification not only enhanced their cultural output but also laid the groundwork for subsequent intellectual movements in Chinese history.

The implications of this cultural awakening continue to resonate in contemporary discussions about the role of intellectuals and scholars in shaping societal values and identity. Today's scholars can draw parallels between the historical experiences of the Shi class and current challenges faced by intellectuals in navigating political and social landscapes. By examining the historical evolution of the Shi class, we gain insights into the enduring significance of cultural self-awareness and its potential to influence the direction of society, ultimately reminding us of the vital role that intellectual engagement plays in fostering a reflective and progressive community.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Chong Yew Yoong for his invaluable assistance in proofreading and revising this paper. His insightful suggestions on several key paragraphs have greatly enhanced the clarity and coherence of the argument presented. His guidance and support have been instrumental in refining the overall structure of this study, and I am deeply appreciative of his contributions.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chang, J. (2007): The role of scholars in early Chinese governance. – *Journal of Asian Studies* 66(4): 541-560.
- [2] Chen, J. (2013): The Rise of the Shi Class and Its Role in Early Chinese Governance. – *Historical Reflections on Ancient China* 11(4): 66-78.
- [3] Chen, Y.H. (2010): Men of Letters in the Wei and Jin Dynasties: Their Natural Aesthetics of Existence. – *Academic Exchange* 4: 31-35.
- [4] Deng, W. (2009): Scholars and intellectual movements during the Wei and Jin Dynasties. – *Chinese Historical Review* 21(3): 234-250.
- [5] Li, F. (2011a): Silk Road and Chinese Imperialism in the Han Dynasty. – *Journal of Historical Studies* 45(2): 65-89.
- [6] Li, X. (2011b): Philosophical transformations in Wei and Jin intellectual history. – *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38(2): 175-195.
- [7] Li, Y.J. (2011c): “Entering the world” and “escaping the world”: The value claims and survival wisdom of the Chinese scholar class. – *Northern Literature (Late Half Month)* 10: 202-203.
- [8] Li, Y.J., Huang, X.Z. (2022): A brief analysis of the fate changes of the traditional scholar class in China. – *Yanhuang Geography* 8: 7-9.
- [9] Liu, D.X. (1996): A historical investigation of the scholar class during the pre-Qin period. – *Theoretical Journal* 6: 80-82.
- [10] Liu, P., Qian, Z. (2010): Factionalism and Internal Conflict in the Eastern Han Dynasty. – *Historical Review* 28(4): 54-78.
- [11] Liu, Y. (2015): Literary Figures and the Rise of Wei in the Three Kingdoms Period. – *Early Chinese Intellectuals Review* 22(1): 13-28.
- [12] Liu, Z., Qian, Y. (2010): Political upheaval in late Han China and the role of the scholar class. – *East Asian Historical Quarterly* 25(1): 89-103.
- [13] Long, Y. (2023): The tenacity and persistence behind capriciousness: An analysis of the contradictions in the behaviors of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. – *Youth Literature* 30: 104-106.
- [14] Wan, Z.S. (2019): The influence of the pre-Qin scholar class culture and the transformation of the modern scholar class. – *Times Report* 5: 182-183.
- [15] Wang, L. (2011): The Political Fragmentation of the Wei and Jin Dynasties. – *Journal of Chinese History* 16(2): 45-57.
- [16] Wang, Z.M. (1995): The rise of the scholar class during the Spring and Autumn period and its socio-cultural characteristics. – *Journal of Northwset Minorities University (Social Sciences)* 4: 103-107.

- [17] Zhang, L.L. (2010): The rise of the scholar class and the emergence of the independent spirit among ancient Chinese intellectuals. – *New Curriculum (Educational Scholarship)* 70p.
- [18] Zhang, W. (2014): Cultural and Political Shifts in the Wei, Jin, and Northern Dynasties. – *Chinese Sociopolitical Review* 9(3): 98-111.
- [19] Zhou, H. (2016): The Shi Class: Intellectuals and Politicians in the Wei and Jin Eras. – *Journal of Ancient Chinese Studies* 12(1): 67-82.
- [20] Zhou, X.F., Zhou, X.M. (2009): The rise of the scholar class and its influence on education. – In *Proceedings of the 20th Anniversary of the Journal of Educational History*, East China Normal University, Sun Yat-Sen University 3: 561-564.