

JIN PING MEI: A STORY OF GUANXI

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Abstract: No fiction is without a narrative of human relationships. In Chinese literary history, the stories represented by *Jin Ping Mei* are especially seen as dealing with human relationships. Some researchers have interpreted *Jin Ping Mei* from the perspective of human relationships; however, the generic concept cannot describe social connections in Chinese culture. The concept of *guanxi*, the ubiquitous and quotidian social network in China, better describes the specific human relationships in this fiction. *Guanxi* as a Chinese cultural phenomenon originating from Confucianism is effective in procuring resources through instrumental and sentimental mechanisms. In *Jin Ping Mei*, which is centered on Ximen Qing, a *guanxi* network connects all the characters. Ximen Qing's fortune is built on *guanxi* manipulation. *Guanxi*, however, which was expected to embody Confucian values, violated Confucian principles in the late Ming context. *Jin Ping Mei* marks a turning point for attitudes toward *guanxi* in literary representation, and this derogatory attitude persisted in the narrative of fiction throughout the Qing dynasty.

Keywords: Confucianism, *guanxi*, *Jin Ping Mei*, *renqing xiaoshuo*, the late Ming dynasty

INTRODUCTION

Jin Ping Mei (The Plum in the Golden Vase) is the most representative human relationship fiction in ancient China. As the first vernacular story reflecting the common world of ordinary people in China, it is one of the four legendary masterpieces (*si da qi shu*), in addition to *Shuihu Zhuan* (Outlaws of the Marsh), *Sanguo Yanyi* (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms), and *Xiyou Ji* (Journey to the West). It marks the thematic transition of Chinese fiction from the world of legendary heroes, or nobles, to the world of ordinary civilians. Of these four stories, *Jin Ping Mei* focuses on *guanxi* to the greatest extent.

The story centers on Ximen Qing, a lustful merchant and corrupt social climber, who develops the mean inheritance from his father to huge abundant wealth. During the process, he makes good use of his wife and concubines, his

sworn brothers and corrupted officials. After his rapid success, however, he dies abruptly and his family is scattered. Those involved in his social network, including women, merchants, scholars, and villains, compose a panoramic picture that graphically reflects Ming society.

According to Lu Xun, *Jin Ping Mei* belongs to the fiction subgenre of *renqing xiaoshuo*, which flourished in the Ming dynasty (1368 AD–1644 AD) and differed from previous fiction genres in Chinese literary history, such as legendary or storytelling fiction, historical fiction, and good-evil fiction, which are far removed from social reality. He defined this subgenre of fiction in chapter 19 of his *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* (A Brief History of Chinese Fiction) (1924): “This type of fiction is called ‘shiqing shu’ in that it does not narrate the supernatural gods or demons, but portrays human society to expose the inconstancy of human relationships” (Lu Xun 2006: 114). Noting the significance of human relationships in this subgenre, English translators such as Philip Clart (2007: xxxi) translated *renqing xiaoshou* as “novels dealing with human relationships”.

The emphasis on human relationships due to Confucian influence is the most notable characteristic in East Asia, especially in China (Yum 1988). Human relationships in Chinese culture can generally be defined as *guanxi*. Without *guanxi*, nothing can be done in China (Y. Ju 1995). It is an informal social network that is ubiquitous, quotidian, and essential among Chinese people. As an Eastern approach to social networks (J. Huang & Aaltio 2014), it has no equivalent word in the English language. English translations such as “personal connections” or “social ties” are loose and general.

Confucianism values and principles do not involve initially instrumentalizing *guanxi* for resource procurement in human relationships. Confucianism states that an individual should act and perform duties according to their social position: “[l]et the ruler be a ruler; the subject, a subject; the father, a father; the son, a son” (Confucius 2007: 82). It also defines the principles of loyalty, filial piety, love and respect, tolerance, and benevolence for the five cardinal social relationships, which are principally the relationships between emperor and minister, father and son, brothers, husband and wife, and friends. *Li*, a Confucian ritual, is both fundamental and vital for the realization of duties and values. *Guanxi*, according to its values and principles, is intended to establish harmonious and ideal human relationships in a hierarchical society.

Various researchers have given different definitions for the Chinese concept of *guanxi*. For example, Gold (1985: 660) states it is “a power relationship as one’s control over a valued good or access to it gives power over others”. Osland (1990: 8) defines it as “a special relationship between a person who needs something and a person who has the ability to give something”. Barbalet (2018: 936) defines it as “a form of asymmetrical exchange of favours between persons on

the basis of enduring sentimental ties in which enhancement of public reputation is the aspirational outcome". Despite the variance of definitions, *guanxi* is both sentimental and instrumental, as a means to procure resources. It is an intricate social network that the Chinese cultivate imaginatively, subtly, and energetically (D.B. Hwang et al. 2009). It has been continuously reinforced as a social mechanism throughout the two thousand years of China's feudal history (Fei 1992 [1947]). Its importance has even increased in contemporary Chinese society, despite economic modernization (Bian 2018).

This critical cultural concept has received scant attention in Chinese literary research, although its study has prospered in sociology, anthropology, and management. To address this gap, this article sets out to interpret the text of *Jin Ping Mei*, a fiction dealing with human relationships, from the perspective of *guanxi*.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS AND GUANXI

The human relationships in *Jin Ping Mei* have been noted by some researchers in China. Two articles have exemplarily discussed it. One is Tian Binge's (1994) "Speculation and disclosure of human tragedy: On the human relationship in *Jin Ping Mei*". He noted that the interpersonal network in *Jin Ping Mei* is centered on Ximen Qing, the protagonist; that the extensive social context is unfolded through the network; that money is the pivot of all the human relationships; when the death of Ximen Qing cuts the connection between money and politics, the decline and disaster of Ximen Qing's family is unavoidable. All the human relationships in this fiction are abnormal, full of betrayal and disloyalty, and both the rise and downfall of Ximen Qing's family are due to human relationships. Tian Moyun (2013) wrote an article "Intentionally communicating with others in one way or another: On the interpersonal relationship of Xi Men-qing in *Jin Ping Mei*". She explains that Ximen Qing obtains wealth, political protection, and the opportunities for illicit affairs through human relationships. Such researchers have described the function of *renji guanxi* (human relationships) as molding the fates of characters.

The concept of "*renji guanxi*", however, is not adequate to analyze such a social mechanism for individuals. Although "*renji guanxi*" contains the word "*guanxi*", researchers have not analyzed the cultural meaning and social function of *guanxi* in a Chinese context. This is because people in China (including many literary researchers) take for granted the importance of human relationships in molding an individual's fate, as Chinese society is relationalism-

oriented. It further indicates the ubiquity and quotidian nature of *guanxi* in Chinese society.

In Chinese Confucianism, personhood is decided by the morals with which an individual interacts with others in social connections (K. Hwang 1999). When Confucianism became the dominant ideology in China, Chinese society was embedded in a relationalism-oriented culture. As relational particularism, *guanxi* emerged from the fundamentals of Chinese culture (Anderson & Lee 2008) and became a fixed element in Chinese society (Wong & Tam 2000). It is essential to human relationships in China.

Guanxi's importance in Chinese society attracted intense academic interest in fields such as sociology and anthropology. Fei Xiaotong describes *guanxi* as *cha xu ge ju*, which means "mode of differential associations" or "the overlapping of egocentric networks" (Fei 1992 [1947]). K. Hwang (1987) states that *guanxi* is a hierarchically structured social network. After Fei and Hwang, the study of *guanxi* flourished. Y. Luo (1997) suggests that *guanxi* is a concept associated with psychology, sociology, anthropology, human resource management, and organizational behavior, as well as economics, management, and marketing; hence, it requires further theoretical development. Chen and Chen and Huang (2013) point out that three streams are prominent in *guanxi* studies: one focuses on the domains of *guanxi* on the individual level, the second focuses on the organizational level, and the third is concerned with *guanxi*'s social and moral dilemmas. None of this theoretical development of *guanxi* has involved literary research, however.

Guanxi is a typical informal social network in the East (P.P. Li 2012), and so it has received the most academic attention among the different types of informal social networks (P.P. Li & Xie 2019).¹ Compared with the increased attention in disciplines such as economics, psychology, marketing, and management, however, there is little *guanxi* study in literary research.

Guanxi is critical for interpreting the social and cultural meanings in *Jin Ping Mei*. Distinguished from previous stories in China, this work was the first civic fiction (*shijing xiaoshuo*) to realistically represent common and mundane urban life (A. Sun 2006). Ximen Qing gains his fortune by manipulating *guanxi*, or the informal social network, and ultimately fails dreadfully. Without *guanxi*, there would be no narrative in this story. It is also interesting that the word "*guanxi*" is rarely used in the whole story, although *guanxi* exists throughout the social networks involved. The mindset of *guanxi* is so common that people take it for granted that *guanxi* is embedded in human relationships, so the word "*guanxi*" is rarely used in fiction.

Because "[g]*uanxi* is deeply rooted in 5000 years of Chinese culture" (Zhan et al. 2018: 2) and China is a strongly *guanxi*-oriented society (Y.-H. Huang

2000), an author cannot ignore its social role and value when writing, and readers should not neglect its significance when reading. *Guanxi* is also a literary archetype in Chinese fiction (Han 2020). The fortunes and misfortunes of the characters in a story are based on *guanxi*, a unique and ubiquitous phenomenon in China.

Jin Ping Mei details the social, familial, and official activities of Ximen Qing and presents readers with a vivid perception and understanding of *guanxi* in the Ming dynasty, an age filled with drastic cultural change. It initiated the growth of human relationship fiction (*renqing xiaoshuo*) in the Ming dynasty (Shi 2015: 72). The analysis of *guanxi* is fundamental to understanding *Jin Ping Mei*. An in-depth interpretation of this story is impossible without understanding the function of *guanxi* in it.

THE THREE INGREDIENTS OF GUANXI

In order to analyze *guanxi* in *Jin Ping Mei*, it is necessary to first investigate the ingredients of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* has three integral components: *ganqing* (affection), *renqing* (obligation), and *mianzi* (face) (K. Hwang 1987; Yen & Barnes & Wang 2011).

Ganqing refers to the degree of emotional understanding, connections and the sharing of feelings of happiness and fears alike. Additionally, it refers to a sense of loyalty and solidarity, the willingness to take care of each other under all circumstances. (X.-P. Chen & C. Chen 2004)

It is the essential element in *guanxi* (C.L. Wang 2007). As a Chinese cultural concept, *ganqing* has no equivalent in English (L. Sun 1991). Although it can be regarded as the emotional attachment between two parties in a network (C.L. Wang 2007), “[t]o equate the Western concept of ‘emotions’ with *qinggan* or *ganqing*, as many Chinese beginners in English do, can be most misleading” (L. Sun 1991: 10). *Ganqing* can be nurtured and cultivated in a relational context by means of mutual help and care. Although mutual help and care is common in every culture, Chinese people use these things as the foundation that confirms and symbolizes relationships (Potter 1988). For example, the phrase *peiyang ganqing* (to cultivate feelings) indicates that the basis of a healthy and strong human relationship, or *guanxi* in China, can be nurtured.

In order to nurture *ganqing*, it is necessary to build and reinforce *guanxi*. A major source of intimacy for the Chinese comes from their in-group and family (Hsu 1972). To nurture *ganqing* and hence reinforce *guanxi*, it is therefore

necessary to establish a feeling of in-group or family, that is, to form a quasi-familial connection between the participants. *Jin Ping Mei* begins by Ximen Qing and nine other villains swearing brotherhood. Ximen Qing claims that he must swear brotherhood with the other nine because of their abilities and future mutual dependence.² Namely, through nurturing *ganqing* by swearing brotherhood, he establishes *guanxi*, which will provide mutual help and care in the future.

Ganqing is the foundation of *guanxi* between the characters in premodern Chinese fiction. Quasi-familial connections to reinforce *ganqing* are described in many other Ming stories. For example, except in *Jin Ping Mei*, all the primary characters in the four legendary masterpieces are in a form of quasi-familial network, which is embedded in facilitating *guanxi* through consolidating *ganqing*. In the first chapter of *Sanguo Yanyi*, an early Ming dynasty work of fiction, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei swear to be brothers, and hence are consistently loyal to each other. In *Xiyou Ji*, four pilgrims include one patriarchal mentor and three brotherly disciples. In *Shuihu Zhuan*, all one hundred and eight heroes and heroines are sworn brothers and sisters. The quasi-familial connections, mutual help and cooperation further enhance their *ganqing*.

Renqing is the obligation to repay favors in the future and show empathy to partners (K. Hwang 1987; C.L. Wang 2007; M.M. Yang 1994). Yang (1994: 67–68) defines it as “the bond of reciprocity and mutual aid between two people, based on emotional attachment or the sense of obligation and indebtedness”. It is therefore both instrumental and expressive. It is reflected in the Chinese notion and moral code of *bao*, which is retribution, repayment, or reciprocity. The Chinese phrase *dong renqing*, which means “knowing reciprocity”, and the phrase *gan'en tubao*, which means “feeling grateful and endeavoring to repay it”, indicate the principle. If someone does not reciprocate in a suitable way, they will be regarded as *budong renqing* (ignorant of reciprocity).

The characters in *Jin Ping Mei* are in the debt and under the obligation of *renqing*. Ximen Qing is adept at creating *renqing*. His main means of creating *renqing* is through gift giving. He is generous when communicating with bureaucrats, and gives them lavish gifts. Also, he never mentions repayment and reciprocity. All the gifts *de facto* need repayment in the long run, although this is not expected immediately (Mauss 1990: 45–46). Premodern Chinese fiction narratives reflect social reality, and always weave the characters in a *renqing* net. The characters are both the debtors and creditors of *renqing*. For example, in *Shuihu Zhuan*, the central character Song Jiang is nicknamed *Jishi Yu* (Timely Rain), as he is like the timely rain in a drought, and always lends a helping hand to those who are suffering. According to the *renqing* principle, he thus always receives help when he is in a dilemma. Once he has received

help, a new *renqing* connection is then formed, and the plot will continue with the obligation and reciprocity created by *renqing*.

Mianzi, or face, refers to one's social position and standing, as recognized by others (Lockett 1988). Saving *mianzi* is critical to establishing and nurturing *guanxi* (Buckley & Clegg & Tan 2006). It is not only instrumental, in that it indicates social position, but also sentimental, in that "in Chinese culture, gaining and losing face is connected closely with issues of social pride, honor, dignity, insult, shame, disgrace, humility, trust, mistrust, respect, and prestige" (Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998: 54). *Mianzi* is critical in Chinese society, as indicated by the adage *ren yaolian, shu yaopi* (a person needs face as a tree needs bark).

Mianzi is ingrained in Chinese fiction. For example, in *Xiyou Ji*, the Monkey King has the utmost *mianzi*. In chapter 56, after he has killed several robbers, Tang Monk is afraid that the ghosts of the dead will sue him and prays that the dead should sue Monkey King and not himself.³ Hearing Tang Monk's pray, Monkey King shows his authority by saying that all the bureaucrats, including the Jade Emperor, give him *mianzi*.⁴ *Mianzi* is a specific cultural convention in Chinese society, and the English translations of *Xiyou Ji* cannot easily convey its cultural implications. Gao Na (2019) noted that the appellations of the characters in this fiction contain *mianzi* connotations, but that the cultural differences involved in understanding *mianzi* have left a gap in the English translations.

As the first realistic vernacular fiction in Chinese literary history, *Jin Ping Mei* does not narrate supernatural or historical stories. In contrast, it describes mundane life in the Ming dynasty. *Guanxi*, which is a literary archetype in Chinese fiction (Han 2020) and ubiquitous in Chinese society, is therefore inevitably pivotal.

GUANXI IN XIMEN QING'S WORLD

Jin Ping Mei panoramically depicts *guanxi* in the late Ming dynasty by telling Ximen Qing's story. The themes of Ximen Qing's story can be divided into three categories: family, society, and officialdom.

Domestic life

Ximen Qing's domestic life, centering on the relationship between Ximen Qing, his wife, and his concubines,⁵ is the core of *Jin Ping Mei*. Taking the Zhenghe period of the North Song (1111 AD–1118 AD) as its literary context, *Jin Ping*

Mei represents the realities of the Ming dynasty, highlighting various human relationships, especially between males and females in the family (Yan & Wang 2013: 177). Connections between family members are a category of *guanxi*.

The *guanxi* between family members is regarded as the most intimate connection, compared to other categories of *guanxi*, such as the *guanxi* between friends and between acquaintances (Chang et al. 2016). *Jin Ping Mei* describes the convivial banquets and gifts exchanged in order to depict the *guanxi* among the family members.

The characters in *Jin Ping Mei* all communicate through the arena of banquets or the process of gift exchange. Such activities are frequent in Ximen Qing's social interaction with his brothers, and with bureaucrats. They are so common in this story that readers may even feel that they are boring, but the banqueting and gift exchange create a joyful atmosphere among the participants.

This does not mean that the *guanxi* in Ximen Qing's family is entirely intimate, however. The banquets and gift exchanges are measures to maintain reliable and trustworthy *guanxi* (M.M. Yang 1994; H. Wang 2000; Ai 2006). A closer scrutiny of the *guanxi* in Ximen Qing's family shows that the bond between the family members is not solidary, however. Although it is large, his family is not based on a blood connection or love: the impetus for these combinations of family members is interest-seeking. The instrumentality of *guanxi* in the family realm is highlighted. It is clearly demonstrated in Ximen Qing's *guanxi* with his wife and concubines, such as Pan Jinlian, Meng Yulou, Li Pinger, and Wu Yueniang.

Pan Jinlian is the fifth woman he marries after the death of Ms Chen, his first wife. She is well known for her carnality. The rapport between Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian is based on sexuality: to win Ximen Qing, she persecutes the other concubines, and when Ximen Qing neglects her slightly, she instantly fornicates with a manservant in the family.

Meng Yulou is the third woman he marries. Before marrying Pan Jinlian, with whom he has been having a sexual affair for quite a long time, Ximen Qing hears from a matchmaker that Meng Yulou has abundant wealth. He soon forgets Pan Jinlian and decides to marry Meng Yulou. Ximen Qing's wealth means that Meng Yulou chooses to marry him, a dishonest merchant, to become one of his concubines, rather than Juren⁶ Shang, another candidate suggested by a matchmaker.

Li Pinger is the sixth woman that Ximen Qing marries. Before their marriage, Li Pinger was the wife of Ximen Qing's sworn brother, Hua Zixu, but was having adulterous sex with Ximen Qing. She stealthily transfers Hua Zixu's wealth to Ximen Qing. Until Hua Zixu discovers he has lost his wealth, his illness is

so aggravated that he dies soon. Once she is a widow, Li Pinger learns of the trouble that Ximen Qing is involved in and marries Jiang Zhushan instead. Finding that Jiang Zhushan cannot meet her sexual desires, and that Ximen Qing is no longer in trouble, she divorces Jiang Zhushan and begs shamelessly to marry the former.

Wu Yueniang is his wife but not a concubine. She is no beauty, but Ximen Qing chooses her as his wife because her father is a local official who can provide him with political protection.

Ximen Qing obtains the economic and social capital for his commercial and official career through the *guanxi* with his wife and concubines, except for Pan Jinlian. He was forced to marry Pan Jinlian because he was afraid that if he did not marry her his crimes would be exposed. Pan Jinlian does not bring economic and social benefits; however, their only connection is sex, which is striking in the context of a culture where passion and sexual desire within marriage are not emphasized (K.-S. Yang 2006). The exchange of interests between Ximen Qing and his women creates *renqing*, an obligation, or reciprocity. In this sense, their *guanxi* is instrumental.

Their *guanxi* is also sentimental. This is shown by Ximen Qing's affection for his late concubine Li Pinger, which is demonstrated by his grieving for her death in chapter 65, and Wu Yueniang's heart-felt prayer for Ximen Qing's fortune in chapter 21. The sentimentality in such activities is a type of *ganqing* in their connections and forms the basis of their interactions.

The *guanxi* between Ximen Qing's family members is fundamentally instrumental, however. There is frequent disloyalty and betrayal due to the desire for money and sex. Both Ximen Qing and his women principally choose their partners according to social and economic capital. Although concubines often came from impoverished families in premodern China, in *Jin Ping Mei*, except for Pan Jinlian, Ximen Qing's concubines are all wealthy and can contribute to Ximen Qing's commercial activities. Marriage to Ximen Qing also brings economic and social interest to the women, because of Ximen Qing's *mianzi*.⁷

The best term with which to describe their connections is *guanxi*, rather than a human relationship or conjugal bond. A human relationship is a generic term which describes general social connections. A conjugal bond conjures altruism and compassionate familial affections. *Guanxi*, the concept of an interpersonal utilitarian relationship with affective attachment, depicts the nature of the family's social connections in *Jin Ping Mei*.

Commercial venture

It is easy for Ximen Qing's commercial venture to find opportunities to earn a huge profit and it is a critical force with which to defeat his business rivals. As the epitome of a new type of merchant in sixteenth-century China, he is a successful "economic man" (Ge 2014). Robinson Crusoe, the literary figure created by Daniel Defoe, is similar to the figure of Ximen Qing; however, *Robinson Crusoe* highlights the labor and struggle to create wealth on an isolated island, whereas Ximen Qing is not described in any productive activity in *Jin Ping Mei*. In contrast to Robinson Crusoe, Ximen Qing's fortune results from his social connections, or *guanxi*, in a crowded town. With the small amount of funds left to him by his father, an impoverished merchant, he accumulates his first capital through marriage, as discussed above. Marriage is not enough for his business, however, and his *guanxi* with bureaucrats and villains⁸ plays a critical role in his commercial venture.

The *guanxi* with these two groups is not defined as friendship. Although it is regarded as one of the five cardinal relationships (*wulun*) by Confucius, friendship is belittled and threatened in Confucianism and its power is lessened by Confucian writers (Kutcher 2000). Friendship is part of the hierarchical order in the context of Chinese paternalism culture (Hall & Ames 1994). Ximen Qing manipulates the *guanxi* proficiently and makes the best use of it to serve his business.

He embeds the *guanxi* in quasi-familial or other hierarchical connections. As discussed above, he swears brotherhood with them to reinforce *guanxi* with the villains who are inferior to him economically and socially. His economic and social advantages mean that he is treated by the other nine as a big brother, although he is not older than any of them. In his first meeting with Cai Jing, the highest official in his *guanxi*, Ximen Qing acknowledges him as his adoptive father, and calls himself the latter's "son" (*haier*).⁹ In his communication with the bureaucrats, he humbly calls himself "a poor officer" (*beiguan*)¹⁰ and "servant" (*pu*),¹¹ or calls others "senior gentlemen"¹² (*lao xiansheng*).¹³ The quasi-familial connections consolidate the *ganqing* between them. Similarly, using a humble appellation for himself and respectfully addressing others increases the *mianzi* of the counterpart. More importantly, his manipulation increases the harmony and stability of the hierarchy in which their *guanxi* is embedded.

Confucianism stresses the hierarchy of social relationships and regards a person's acceptance and fulfilment of the hierarchical role as essential to the smooth functioning of society. The exchange of social and economic interests is easily conducted in a hierarchy. The person with higher hierarchical rank is expected to assist those who are disadvantaged, and hence gains *mianzi*

(Yeung & Tung 1996). Those of lower hierarchical status can call for special favors which they do not have to equally repay (Alston 1989). Ximen Qing can gain favoritism from the bureaucrats with repayment at a relatively low price through the *guanxi* in the hierarchy. Similarly, the villains can also earn considerable incomes from him, while he can also obtain support from them.

In Ximen Qing's commercial activities, his greatest profit is through *guanxi* with corrupt bureaucrats. The favoritism of the bureaucrats is shown through their official power and political influence. For example, by bribing Zhuangyuan¹⁴ Cai, who later became the inspector and supervisor of the salt business, Ximen Qing acquired privileges one month earlier than other merchants. In other words, he had a monopoly on salt sales for one month and thus gained a sudden huge profit; Ximen Qing monopolizes the antique trade through his *guanxi* with Song Qiaonian, the inspector of Shandong Province, and by buying the bureaucrats in charge of tax, Ximen Qing evades most tax payments.

Aside from the favoritism from the corrupted bureaucrats, Ximen Qing's commercial venture also gains help from villains at the bottom of society through his *guanxi* with them. The force of the villains was critical in the Ming dynasty, when the hooligan culture¹⁵ dominated (Y. Wang 2000a, 2000b). It permeated every social level. Without a reliable legal system and enforcement, villains played a critical role. Whether his social status is low or high, Ximen Qing maintains intimate *guanxi* with the villains. His wife Wu Yuening protests when he decides to swear brotherhood with the villains, but Ximen Qing demonstrates that the villains are useful and quite in service to him.¹⁶ His judgement regarding the villains is supported. In many cases, the villains play a critical role in his commercial ventures. For example, he uses two villains to beat Jiang Zhushan, his adversary, almost to death. By persecuting Jiang Zhushan through the villains, Ximen Qing not only procures material wealth but also attains the woman he wants, Li Pinger.

Ximen Qing's collusion with both the corrupt bureaucrats and the evil villains is ostensibly not depicted as dark and wicked. The readers of *Jin Ping Mei* are told about banquets and gift exchanges in almost every episode of every chapter. As the narrative style of premodern Chinese fiction, without detailed introduction and explanation, relied greatly on dialogue to advance plot (Bishop 1956), such seemingly monotonous narratives often result in misinterpretation. To interpret the narrative correctly, it is necessary to identify the function of the banquet and gift exchange in Chinese culture for social connections, or *guanxi*.

The banquet and gift exchange are elements of *li* ingrained in social connections in China. *Li* means a ritual, gift, courtesy, propriety, rite, ceremony, or norm of conduct. Influenced by Confucianism, the practice of *li* was excessively stringent in ancient China, and it was even regarded as closely related to *dao*,

which is the natural order (Needham 1956: 544). The hierarchical order is further confirmed and stabilized through gift exchange and holding banquets. Propriety and norms of conduct are practiced in a banquet. Those of low hierarchical status should firstly donate gifts to those with higher status. Both gift and banquet are critical rituals in Chinese society.

The rituals significantly facilitate *guanxi*. According to *renqing* principle, the recipients of gifts should repay them in a suitable way, which for the bribed bureaucrats is to provide favoritism. The attendees of a banquet can earn *mianzi* and thus enhance their social prestige and honor. The joy and generosity in banquet and gift exchange promote the *ganqing* among the participants, which is the basis of their *guanxi*. The exchange of interests therefore does not seem like ugly collusion, but is *guanxi*, a normal social network in Chinese society.

Guanxi rationalizes Ximen Qing's bribery of bureaucrats. Although bribery is common in many societies, the use of ritual to morally validate bribery in China is a particular cultural phenomenon (Ruan 2021). Banquets and gift exchanges are the two most common means.

Ximen Qing's complicity with the villains is also extenuated to a large extent in the rituals. The story shows the readers the brotherhood between Ximen Qing and the villains through the narrative of banquet and gift exchange. All the rituals are based on the *guanxi* mechanism and ultimately contribute to its function in his commercial venture.

Official experience

Without attending the imperial examination, the semi-illiterate Ximen Qing later becomes an official through *guanxi* and thus inaugurates his official career.¹⁷ As a successful and wealthy merchant, why does Ximen Qing want to become an official? There are two reasons for his eagerness to hold an official position.

The first reason is his need for official protection. Feudal China was a country that emphasized agriculture and repressed commercialism. This determined the low social status and unsafe economic situation of a merchant. Ximen Qing therefore covets an official position to procure greater commercial profit and secure his wealth (J. Wang 1995).

The second reason is that an official position can bring huge social and economic interests. As discussed above, premodern Chinese society greatly stressed hierarchy. Ximen Qing recognizes the importance of the hierarchy. For example, in chapter 41, he does not agree to the matchmaking for his infant son and the infant daughter of the Qiao family, who is relatively wealthy but not as much

a part of officialdom as Ximen Qing. He thinks this *guanxi* established by his son's marriage will bring ignominy to him and thus makes him lose *mianzi*.¹⁸ His official influence would then weaken. He adeptly manipulates his *guanxi* to maximize the benefits brought by his official position. He bribes those with higher hierarchical status and is bribed by those with lower hierarchical status. It is difficult even for the educated Chinese to articulate the difference between bribery and *guanxi* (M.M. Yang 1994: 62–63). Walder (1986: 17) describes *guanxi* as “ceremonial bribery”. *Guanxi* is also blurred with other concepts, such as friendship, blood and quasi-familial relationships. It facilitates Ximen Qing's bribery to a great extent. He gains an official position and promotion by bribing other bureaucrats. In chapter 30, impressed by Ximen Qing's sumptuous gifts, Cai Jing appoints him as the deputy magistrate of Shandong province.¹⁹ Later, in chapter 70, his frequent gifts to Cai Jing mean that Ximen Qing is promoted from deputy magistrate to magistrate.²⁰ In chapter 49, seeing Yushi²¹ Song is sent by the central government to supervise the local bureaucrats, Ximen Qing bribes him with a lavish banquet and extravagant gifts. In chapters 74 and 75, hearing Yushi Song praise the *ding*²² in his courtyard, Ximen Qing happily donates it to Song Qiaonian.²³ After presenting gifts, in chapter 76, Yushi Song asks for suggestions from Ximen Qing, and reports favorably to the emperor about local bureaucrats who have *guanxi* with Ximen Qing.²⁴ Accordingly, Ximen Qing gains *mianzi* and expands his political influence in the local officialdom.

Meanwhile, Ximen Qing is also bribed by those lower in the hierarchy. In chapter 31, when the news that he has been promoted as an official spreads locally, people donate gifts to him all day when he assumes office.²⁵ A typical case during his term of office involves Miao Qing's bribery of him. As a murderer, Miao Qing endeavors to bribe him to evade legal punishment. His first bribery is not successful due to the low price of the gifts. In a second attempt he spends plenty of money to bribe him and achieves his goal. Ximen Qing accumulates huge wealth by accepting gifts like that. More meaningfully, they establish *guanxi* with each other through the bribery, which means the interest exchange will continue according to the principle of *renqing*. In chapter 77, Miao Qing buys a young girl and is willing to present her to Ximen Qing.²⁶ Resources, economic or social, are constantly flowing between hierarchies through *guanxi*.

The resource flow by no means involves only economic transactions. It also involves the creation of social capital, which is embodied as *guanxi*. Bourdieu defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986: 249), and economic capital as the capital that “is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights” (ibid.:

245). *Guanxi* is a variant of social capital, and its influence is more profound than economic capital in that it can bring out both economic interest and further social capital (Qi 2013: 318).

Ximen Qing is wise in that he never treats bribery ostensibly as an economic transaction. In *guanxi*, the obligations should not “be enforced and imposed on the obliged party by third parties”, otherwise it will be economic capital without social capital (Smart 1993: 393). When he presents gifts, Ximen Qing never claims repaid obligations from others. The bribery created by the gift-presenting is all in the name of brotherhood, filial piety, respect, compassion, and other intimate affections of *guanxi*. Gift presentations maintain good *guanxi* between Ximen Qing and other officials, gain him an official position, and enable him to procure increasing wealth. The price of the gifts he sends out, compared to his income and protection through *guanxi*, is negligible.

In the context of the “rule of man” (*renzhi*), but not “rule of law” (*fazhi*) in premodern China (Su 2005), Ximen Qing is not punished despite his nefarious activities; on the contrary, he is highly respected because he maintains good *guanxi* with different hierarchies. More importantly, he both secures and accumulates his wealth by obtaining an official position, and through his *guanxi* net.

PECUNIARY SOCIETY AND *GUANXI*

The prevalence of *guanxi*'s special function in the late Ming dynasty, as reflected in *Jin Ping Mei*, is due to the pecuniary society of the era. The late Ming dynasty, which is reflected in *Jin Ping Mei*, witnessed a profound change of culture and customs in the transformation from an agricultural society to a commercial community. With the boom in commercialism, advances in productivity, and the cheap labor force, China, especially southeast China, experienced unprecedented economic prosperity, with silver “headed to China from all corners of the earth” (Flynn & Giráldez 1997: XVIII). Commercialism meant that numerous merchants became rich quickly. The economic transformation also resulted in an alteration of ethos.

Admiration for money was soon widespread throughout society. Many civilians no longer engaged in agriculture, which was traditionally advocated by the preceding dynasties, and instead engaged in commercial business or learned the techniques of commercial production (H. Wang 2015: 36). Popular customs changed accordingly in this atmosphere of commercialism. Society became money-oriented. For example, before the late Ming dynasty, a marriage match was made according to social status and morality; however, in the late Ming dynasty, it was according to the wealth possessed by the two families involved

(H. Wang 2015: 36). In *Jin Ping Mei*, Meng Yulou chooses Ximen Qing rather than Juren Shang as her husband because the latter has less wealth than the former, despite his higher social status.

This age also witnessed astonishing corruption, from emperors to the lowest-level officials, and severe chaos. Unfettered power caused the malfunctioning of the Ming dynasty governments. This is especially apparent in the emperors' laziness in national governing and their intentional embezzlement of the revenue intended for the governments (Z. Liu 2008). Ming officials had unprecedentedly low salaries compared to official salaries in the dynasties of Chinese history (Liu & Huang & Hu 2006). Officials who relied solely on salary in the Ming dynasty could not lead a decent life, and so some officials had to borrow money from rich merchants. As demonstrated in chapter 3 of *Jin Ping Mei*, matchmaker Wang Po describes Ximen Qing as a usurer for officials. The poor salary situation contributed to corruption in officialdom (Ni & Van 2006). Once honest income was too meager to sustain a decent living with the widened gap between honest and corrupt incomes, officials had to resort to other means, including accepting or even demanding bribery.

Under these conditions, *guanxi* became prominent. This is shown in *Jin Ping Mei*, in chapter 36, where Zhuangyuan Cai, who has insufficient traveling expenses to return to his hometown, borrows money from Ximen Qing. By lending money to Zhuangyuan Cai, who would have important power in the future, Ximen Qing establishes steady *guanxi* with him. He procures a monopoly on salt sales for one month through this *guanxi*, and thus earns a huge commercial profit. This abuse of power and the illegitimate monopoly, however, damage the rights of other merchants and imperil the market order, resulting in the merchants' eagerness to curry *guanxi* with officials, and thus creating a vicious circle.

Despite the mean salaries, severe corruption enabled Ming officials to generally enjoy quite luxurious lives by accepting bribes (Zhuang 2012). Corrupt income was estimated to be between 14 and 22 times the formal salary income in the Ming and Qing governments (Ni & Van 2006). However, the corruption resulted in the decline of the Ming dynasty. Neglected by the emperors and exacerbated by officials on different levels, it was so ruinous that the army was weakened due to decreased national income when Yan Song was the prime minister (Z. Luo 2007). It even endangered the national disaster relief system and ultimately worsened the disasters of drought, locust plagues, and epidemic deaths in the Chongzhen period (1628 AD–1644 AD), which dealt a heavy blow to the Ming dynasty (M. Ju 2011).

Money worship further aggravated social chaos. The most typical example of this turbulence is the rising hooligan culture, which damaged the social

atmosphere. This extraordinary hooligan culture emerged and permeated different levels of social strata, accelerating the collapse of traditional social institutions and moralities (Y. Wang 2000a). It was pervasive in all social strata, from the emperors to the grassroots. For example, in high officialdom, the bureaucrats were villain-like in their political operations (Y. Wang 2000a, 2000b); at the grassroots level, the heads of villages were generally hooligans or villains who bullied and exploited villagers through various means (B. Chen 2013: 375).

The hooligan culture subverted healthy human relationships among the folk. For example, in Xinghua County in the late Ming dynasty, a “frivolous mood permeate[d] society; modest and honest ethos vanish[ed]; hierarchal order of the older and younger was abandoned” (Li Chunfang 2014: 156). Unconditional trust, sincere affection, and universal benevolence, which were advocated by Confucianism for human relationships, faded or even disappeared. *Guanxi*, which originated from Confucianism (Luo & Huang & Wang 2012), was thus transmuted into a pragmatic tool for material procurement.

The pecuniary society of the Ming dynasty meant that *guanxi* had a negative effect. The corrupt bureaucracy and hooligan culture weakened Confucian values in the social ethos and misused *li*. The *li* in *guanxi* was used pragmatically to access resources in hierarchical society, as demonstrated by Ximen Qing’s domestic life, commercial venture, and official experience. *Guanxi* became a magical weapon, which was ostensibly justified by Confucianism, for pecuniary procurement through social connections in the late Ming dynasty when mercantilism was burgeoning.

JIN PING MEI: A TURNING POINT FOR THE LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF GUANXI

Although *guanxi* is a ubiquitous social network in Chinese society, *Jin Ping Mei* delineates and criticizes its negative function in such a turbulent age. This denunciation is demonstrated by the following: first, the author’s identity, although still unidentified, is that of Confucian gentry, as indicated by his familiarity with Confucian classics and literary art; second, he affirms and emphasizes Confucianism, although he satirizes the abnormal behavior of Confucian intellectuals in this masterpiece (L. Chen 1992). Through his disclosure of the ugly side of *guanxi*’s function, we can see that he longs to idealize human relationships that conform to the Confucianism value.

The social condition of the late Ming dynasty determined that such a poetic human relationship could never come true. The unprecedented economic focus, political corruption, and money worshipping ethos all led to a new mechanism

of *guanxi*. Further, harmonious traditional Confucian human connections were ruined with the weakened influence of Confucian values, partly as a result of the extreme difficulty of the imperial examination²⁷ (X. Liu 2007), in addition to the dire low salaries of Confucian officials, and the numerous nouveau riche in the merchant class. The social turbulence resulting from the collusion of the merchant class and officials (Tang & Wang 2015: 75) also exacerbated the distrust of Confucian values. Consequently, *guanxi* in the late Ming dynasty was transformed to serve new goals. *Jin Ping Mei* represents the transformation. The characters in the story make use of *guanxi* to do evil and procure undeserved status and wealth. *Guanxi* has therefore had a derogatory meaning in literary representation since the late Ming dynasty.

The derogatory meaning of *guanxi* did not disappear in the following Qing dynasty. The Qing dynasty faced almost the same fundamental situations as those in the late Ming, including the low salaries and corruption of the official classes and the increasing difficulty in the imperial examination (R. Wang 1993). Trade was also active, as demonstrated by international trade: despite the restrictions from the government, trade between China and Europe increased by 4% annually, and the trade volume doubled every 18 years (Myers & Wang 2002: 587). The official promotion of Confucianism in the two dynasties did not reinforce Confucian values but, on the contrary, further damaged them. Witnessing the recession of Confucianism, the Ming and Qing governments promoted Confucianism in all social strata (Chow 1996 [1994]; Nie 2015). The economic, political, and social situation doomed it to failure, however. As *guanxi*, an informal social network that was critical to welfare, depended on *li*, the external expressions of Confucian values, the promotion by governments only consolidated the misuse of Confucianism to serve the mechanism of *guanxi* to procure underserved fortune.

The derogatory meaning of *guanxi* therefore continued in the literary works of the Qing dynasty. The theme of *guanxi* supports all the conflicts and plots in *Honglou Meng* (A Dream of Red Mansions), the most renowned Qing masterpiece. It is described as a negative social force. *Guanxi* from the emperor empowers the four large families. Although they are rampant and despotic, the *guanxi* from the emperor means that the families have never been punished. Once the *guanxi* from the emperor vanishes, all four large families collapse, their wealth is confiscated, and the people are sold as slaves.

Jin Ping Mei is the epitome of the popular perception of *guanxi* in the late Ming dynasty. In literary history, it is a representative turning point of the attitude toward *guanxi* in Chinese fiction writing. It provides a cultural perspective from which to delineate the implications and perceptions of *guanxi*, and shows that the concept of, and attitude toward, *guanxi* was not static

but dynamic. Although it originated from Confucianism and has existed in China for a long time, *guanxi*'s distinct function was not palpable until the late Ming dynasty, when mercantilism burgeoned and Confucian values faded. As a realistic fiction, *Jin Ping Mei* details the mechanism and function of *guanxi* in every aspect of social life.

CONCLUSION

Human relationships exist in any fiction narrative, and in *Jin Ping Mei*, a story created in the late Ming dynasty, they have a special social meaning. Human relationships can be defined as *guanxi* due to their mechanism and function. Centered on Ximen Qing, a *guanxi* net connects all the characters in this fiction, which include those from the high official Cai Jing to the grassroots villains. The rise and fall of Ximen Qing, a semi-illiterate villain, are decided by *guanxi*. As a successful merchant, he is proficient in the operation of *guanxi*, the magic weapon for his wealth and status. Without understanding *guanxi*, there will be no appropriate interpretation of *Jin Ping Mei*.

The utilitarian nature of *guanxi* in interest exchange is highlighted in its representation. Although *guanxi* originated from Confucianism and existed in the fiction prior to *Jin Ping Mei*, its derogatory meaning was not stressed so distinctly until this fiction. The derogatory implications and perceptions of *guanxi* are determined by the historical context of the late Ming dynasty, a period of money worship, social chaos, and political corruption. The unique social context decided the perception of *guanxi* in the late Ming culture. Burgeoning mercantilism and the recession of Confucianism were the two fundamental contexts for the new mechanism and function of *guanxi*, and eventually resulted in the distinct palpability of *guanxi* in culture. Further, in the pandemonium of the late Ming dynasty society, such as hooligan culture and bureaucratic corruption, the *guanxi* principle deviated from its original Confucianism value. This social network became the cause of social injustice with great effect. The derogatory narration of *guanxi* inaugurated in *Jin Ping Mei* then persisted in literary creations in the Qing dynasty.

NOTES

- ¹ For example, despite the tremendous influence of *yonggo*, which is the informal social network in Korea, it gained less academic attention than *guanxi* in China (Jaeyeol 2000). The Japanese informal social network is also lesser known than *guanxi* (Esyun & Shumpei & Creighton 1985; Suzuki 1989).
- ² Ximen Qing said, “I find your conversation delightful, but today your remarks are a little wearying. To hear you talk, all my friends might be beyond the pale. I don’t mind so much what you say about the others, but surely Brother Ying is an honest, entertaining fellow. If we ask him to do anything for us, he never raises any objection, and what he does, he does well. Then Xie Xida is clever as well as conscientious. But there is this much to be said. So long as our meetings are irregular and uncertain, we can never develop our friendship on the proper lines. The next time we all come together, the best thing we can do will be to form a brotherhood, and ever afterwards we shall be able to count upon receiving assistance, if we need any.” (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 15)
- (The citation of *Jin Ping Mei* is according to the Chongzhen edition. The English translation is according to Clement Egerton’s *The Golden Lotus*. Egerton chose the past tense to translate the fiction. As the present tense can create a feeling that the events are in real time and thus have a vivid effect, I chose the present tense to discuss the fiction in the main text of this article.)
- ³ Know who it was who wronged you, just as you would know a debtor, and do not bring a case against the monk who is going to fetch the scriptures (Wu 2010: 1859).
- ⁴ “I am not scared. The Jade Emperor knows me. The Heavenly Kings do as I say. The Twenty-eight Constellations are afraid of me. The Nine Bright Shiners, the star lords, are scared of me. The city gods of counties and prefectures kneel to me; the God of the Eastern Peak Who Is Equal to Heaven is terrified of me. The Ten Kings of the Underworld used to be my servants. The Five Fierce Gods were once my juniors. The five Commanders of the Three Worlds and the Officers of the Ten Directions are all my very good friends. So go and bring your case wherever you like.” (Wu 2010: 1861)
- ⁵ Concubine in Chinese is *qie*, which means the woman a man married except his wife in premodern China.
- ⁶ Juren, an erudite in Confucianism, means a successful candidate in the imperial examinations at the provincial level.
- ⁷ Although a commoner and villain, Ximen Qing has profound influence in the local area. He is crafty and has *guanxi* with high officials, so all the natives in the county are quite afraid of him.
- “Ximen Qing was reckless, but when he took it into his head to bestir himself, he was capable of showing that he was no fool. He lent money to the officials and even had dealings with the four corrupt ministers, Gao, Yang, Tong and Cai. So he came to be mixed up in all kinds of official matters, acting as intervener for people at law, arbitrating in cases of dispute, and, sometimes, acting as stakeholder. The people of Qinghe stood in awe of him...” (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 13)
- ⁸ Villain in Chinese is *liumang*, which indicates those of immoral behaviors. Ximen Qing, his sworn brothers, and the hooligans, scoundrels and rascals are *liumang*.
- ⁹ In chapter 55, when Ximen Qing first meets Cai Jing, he says:

“Your son,” he said, “has nothing to offer. I have brought no more than a few trifles in honor of your most illustrious birthday. It is as though one brought a feather for ten thousand li. But may your Eminence live as long as the Mountains of the South!” (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 1331)

¹⁰ In chapter 36, he tells Zhuangyuan Cai and Jinshi An:

“I am only a poor military officer of low rank,” Ximen Qing said. “How should I dare to allow myself to be called by my second name?” (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 889)

(Jinshi was the highest degree in the imperial examination in imperial China. Zhuangyuan was the rank in imperial examination, and Jinshi is an academic degree. Those obtaining a rank and degree, who were selected by imperial examination, would be appointed as imperial officials.)

¹¹ For example, in chapter 49, when Ximen Qing first meets Song Qiaonian:

[He] fell upon his knees. “Your humble servant,” he said, “is but a plain soldier, one subject to your commands. It is an honor to receive from you a visit which brings enlightenment to this poor hovel.” (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 1165)

¹² In Chinese culture, being senior in age is regarded as having more experience and knowledge, so the appellation *lao xiansheng* is to show respect.

¹³ In chapter 36, when he meets Zhuangyuan Cai and Jinshi An for the first time, he says:

“I had a letter from Master Zhai the other day telling me that your worthinesses were about to visit us on your emblossomed boat. I should have been there to welcome you, but, unfortunately, my official duties would not allow me. I must most humbly beg your pardon...” (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 887)

¹⁴ Zhuangyuan is the first-placed scholar in the highest imperial examination, who was promised a future official career in imperial China.

¹⁵ In his research article “Mingdai liumang wenhua de exing pengzhang yu zhuanzhi zhengti de guanxi jiqi dui guomin xinli de yingxiang” (Y. Wang 2000a, 2000b), Wang Yi translated *liumang wenhua* as “hooligan culture”. He sees that hooligan culture is an ingredient of Chinese social culture, especially in the middle and late Ming dynasty. Although premodern Chinese culture is generally based on Confucianism hierarchy, it also has some marginal cultures originating from vagrant stratum since the Qin dynasty (221–207 BC), which is hooligan culture.

¹⁶ Ximen Qing said, “If we ask him to do anything for us, he never raises any objection, and what he does, he does well.” (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 15)

¹⁷ Imperial examination was the main way to select candidates for the bureaucracy in premodern China, after the mid-Tang dynasty. The system focused on its intellectual nature during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

¹⁸ “Now that it has been settled,” Ximen Qing said, “it doesn’t matter, but there is a certain inequality of position. Qiao has some property, but he is only a private citizen, while I am an officer and have duties at the courts. If we have to ask him to a party here, he will wear an ordinary hat, and I don’t see how I can invite him to sit with me. It will be most awkward.” (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 997)

¹⁹ The Imperial Tutor called for writing materials and filled up a blank warrant of appointment. (He wrote the name of Ximen Qing on it, which indicated the latter as having the official rank as a deputed captain and an official position as a magistrate in Shandong province.) (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 715)

Clement Egerton did not translate the meaning in the brackets for the Chinese sentence. To complement the meaning, I translated it. Deputy captain is an official rank, and magistrate is an official position. Therefore, his official title is Deputy Magistrate of Shandong province.

²⁰ Ximen Qing had sent a man to Huaqing to get news from Captain Lin. The captain gave him a copy of the Imperial Gazette and five qian of silver, and the man traveled back post-haste to Qinghe. Xia and Ximen Qing were waiting for him at the office. They opened the envelope. First, they read the document that dealt with the inspection of the officials in their district. It related his Majesty's approval of the project to investigate the conduct of the officers, and spoke of Xia and Ximen Qing in these terms:

"Ximen Qing, Vice-Captain and Deputy Magistrate, is also an efficient officer. He is renowned for the subtlety of his judgments, and, being a wealthy man, he does not accept bribes. He is attentive to his duties and carries them out satisfactorily. He has never received a penny that is not justly his due. He maintains the dignity of the law and the people respect him. His promotion to the full rank of Captain is suggested, and he should be confirmed in his appointment as Magistrate." (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 1763–1765)

²¹ Yushi, an official title, is the supervisor sent by the central government to inspect the local authorities. Zhuangyuan Cai later becomes Yushi Cai.

²² *Ding* was a type of vessel in antiquity. It was a symbol of power and later was also an instrument to burn incense.

²³ In chapter 74:

Song was impressed by the magnificence and convenience of Ximen Qing's house. The books, pictures and furniture were all the best of their kind. In front of the screen stood a gilded tripod with the figures of the Eight Immortals. It was of very fine workmanship and several feet high. Incense was burning in it, and the smoke came out through the mouths of deer and storks. He went and examined it more closely.

"This tripod is beautifully made," he said to Ximen Qing. (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 1889)

In chapter 75:

The next day, she rose first, opened the door and lit a fire. Then she helped Ximen Qing to dress. He went to the front court and told Daian to send Ben the Fourth with two soldiers to take the golden tripod with his card to Gensor Song's place. "When they have delivered it," he said, "they must wait for a return card." (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 1907)

²⁴ Song asked about the local dignitaries. "Prefect Hu is very well liked," Ximen Qing said, "and District Magistrate Li is most conscientious in his work. I have not had much to do with the others."

"You know Major Zhou," Censor Song said. "What do you think of him?"

"He is an experienced soldier," Ximen Qing said, "but I should hardly say that he is so efficient as Jing of Jizhou. Jing passed the military examination when he was still quite young, and he is as capable as he is brave. Perhaps your Excellency will keep an eye on him."

"Are you speaking of Jing Zhong? Do you know him?"

"He is a friend of mine," Ximen said. "Yesterday he brought a card and asked me to speak to your Excellency on his behalf."

"I have heard that he is a good officer," the Censor said. "Is there anyone else?"

“There is my wife’s brother, Wu Kai. He is a Captain here and in charge of the alterations to the granary. He is due for promotion, and, if your Excellency helps him, I shall be involved in his honor.”

“As he is your kinsman,” Song said, “I will not only recommend him for promotion, but see that he gets an appointment worth having.”

Ximen Qing bowed and thanked him. He gave the Censor the two men’s records of service. Song handed them to one of his officers and said they were to be brought before him when he prepared his report. (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 1957–1959)

²⁵ Meanwhile, presents and visiting cards came to his house in shoals. (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 937)

²⁶ Fortunately, Cui Ben had not gone away. He kowtowed to Ximen Qing and handed him the accounts.

“The boats are at the wharf,” he said, “and I need money to pay both freight and duty. We set off together on the first day of the month and separated at Yangzhou. The others went on to Hangzhou. I stayed a couple of days at Miao Qing’s. He has spent ten taels of silver on a Yangzhou girl for you. She is sixteen years old, the daughter of a captain there, and her name is Chuyun. I can’t tell you how beautiful she is. I can only say that her face is like a flower, her skin like jade, her eyes like stars, her eyebrows like the new moon, her waist like the willow, and her feet hardly three inches long. She is so beautiful that the fish when they see her sink to the depths of the river, and geese fall stricken to the ground. She is pretty enough to make the moon retire in shame and the flowers hang their heads. She knows three thousand short songs and eight hundred long ones. At the moment she is at Miao Qing’s house, and he is getting ready ornaments and clothes to send with her. He is going to send her with Laibao in the spring, in the hope that she will amuse you when you feel the need of amusement.” (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 2008: 2019–2021)

²⁷ The content of imperial examination in premodern China heavily emphasized Confucianism.

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