

# Social and Literary Function of the Gift Exchange Narrative in *Jin Ping Mei*

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**Abstract:** Gift exchange is necessary to maintain *guanxi*, a ubiquitous system of social networks in China, which has drawn little academic attention in Chinese literary criticism. The narrative of gift exchange for *guanxi* permeates *Jin Ping Mei*. Through gift exchange, the central character, Ximen Qing, achieved his fortune and success. This article sets out to discuss the social and literary function of gift exchange narratives in terms of plot and characterization from the perspective of *guanxi*. It argues that the necessary asymmetry in gift exchange, as a part of *guanxi*, propels narrative development, creates suspense that arouses the reader's curiosity, and leads narrative coherence. Without direct psychologizing of characters' minds, the narrative of gift exchange offers glimpses into the inner worlds of the characters by combining an instrumental purpose and sentimental means.

**Keywords:** *Jin Ping Mei*, gift exchange, *guanxi*, Confucianism, Ming dynasty, Ximen Qing.

## Introduction

Gift giving is a ubiquitous and long-standing behavior in social interaction (Ruffle 1999; Cavanaugh, Gino, and Fitzsimons 2015). The binding obligations created by a gift are generally reciprocated (Mauss 2002: 1). However, “reciprocity is in any society a rule of life, and in some societies at least it is *the* rule of life” (Noonan 1984: 3). This is especially so in China, where *guanxi* 關係, a system of informal social networks, is commonplace, and the reciprocity created by gift exchange in social connections is culturally unavoidable.

Compared to episodes of the other three of the four great masterworks of Chinese literature (*sida qishu* 四大奇書)—*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (San-guo Yanyi 三國演義), *Water Margin* (Shuihu Zhuan 水滸傳), and *Journey to the West* (Xiyou Ji 西遊記)—the episodes of *The Golden Lotus*, or *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅) feature ample cases of gift exchange as part of *guanxi*. Despite being a literary archetype of Chinese fiction (Han 2020), *guanxi* has received scant attention in literary criticism. Although *Jin Ping Mei* is full of *guanxi*-related events, which decide the fortunes and misfortunes of the characters, there is inadequate literary research on this phenomenon. In particular, little research has examined the literary function of gift exchange from the aesthetic perspective of narration in *Jin Ping Mei*, the first work of Chinese vernacular fiction to detail common life in the late Ming dynasty.

To fill the deficit in the existing research, this article investigates the social meaning and literary function of gift exchange in plot creation and psychological exploration. It argues that gift exchange has significant social and cultural meaning in *guanxi*, an informal social network embedded in Confucianism. Based on social and cultural meaning, the gift exchange narrative in *Jin Ping Mei* contributes to plot creation and psychological representation. The structure of the article is arranged as follows. First, the article conducts a literature review of the existing scholarship on *guanxi*, gift exchange, and the gift exchange narrative in *Jin Ping Mei*. Second, it outlines the relation between Chinese *li* 禮 (“gift”) culture and gift exchange. Third, it surveys gift exchange in the Ming dynasty. Fourth, it investigates the attributes of gift exchange in *Jin Ping Mei*. Fifth, it discusses the function of gift exchange narratives in plot creation. The sixth section examines the role of gift exchange in psychological representation.

### Literature Review

*Guanxi* is a system of informal social networks through which the asymmetrical exchange of favors functions. In the past four decades, *guanxi* research has prospered in anthropology, sociology, and business (Chen, Chen, and Huang 2013; Liu and Mei 2015); however, in spite of *guanxi*’s critical meaning in Chinese society, *guanxi* has gained scant attention in Chinese literary criticism. It has three elements: *ganqing* 感情, *renqing* 人情, and *mianzi* 面子 (Hwang 1987; Yen, Barnes, and Wang 2011). *Ganqing*, translated as “affection,” “sentiment,” or “emotion,” is the psychological commitment among the participants of *guanxi* (Yang 1994); *renqing*, translated as “favors” or “obligations,” can enhance mutual trust and contributes to long-term exchange (Wang, Siu, and Barnes 2008); *mianzi*, translated as “face” or “prestige,” is the recognition by others of one’s social standing and position (Lockett 1988).

Scholarly accounts of *guanxi* emphasize two perspectives: institutional and instrumental. The former is characterized by expressions and affection, and the latter features business motivations and objectives (Gao and Fennell 2017). Yan Gao and Shailaja Fennell (2017: 5) found that the instrumental and affective aspects of *guanxi* are mutually inclusive. Yanjie Bian (2006) defined *guanxi* as a sentimental tie with the potential to facilitate instrumental exchange. Moreover, Jack Barbalet (2018) elaborated on the determinative role of emotions in social exchange in *guanxi* and pointed out that social sentiments and emotion complexes, which are not single emotions, substantiate assurance in exchange. The research on *guanxi* has provided a theoretical prerequisite for investigation into the connection between psychological analysis and gift exchange in fiction.

*Guanxi* can easily be transformed into social capital, which is trust in and obligations to social connections (Smart 1993). By presenting a gift, an actor can earn special favor in social interactions (Yang 1994). Through it, *guanxi* is established, sustained, and reinforced (Yang 1994). Gift giving facilitates bribery and results in corruption in business relationships in China (Steidlmeier 1999). However, gift exchange per se is not bribery, in which coercion predominates but is an arena of emotional practice (Barbalet 2018). The above-mentioned studies indicate

that gift exchange as a part of *guanxi* is by no means simply an economic activity but also a process with significant social implications.

Thus, these studies provide a theoretical basis for analyzing the plot and narrative concerning gift exchange in *Jin Ping Mei*. Significant economic developments from the sixteenth century onward accelerated the speed of social exchange in Ming society (Rawski 1985). Social exchange theory and gift exchange theory provide a perspective for interpreting such a phenomenon; however, the rise of *guanxi* research in sociology has incidentally paralleled a decline of social exchange theory (Barbalet 2018: 3). Compared to social exchange theory, the *guanxi* perspective stresses network attributes, which are especially important in the Chinese relation-oriented society (Hwang 1987). Although gift exchange theory emphasizes reciprocity (Frémeaux and Michelson 2011: 67), the *guanxi* perspective additionally provides a dimension that considers emotion an important aspect of gift exchange (Barbalet 2018). Thus, the *guanxi* perspective is more appropriate for analyzing gift exchange in *Jin Ping Mei* to understand its meaning in plot development and the disclosure of the inner worlds.

Gift exchange in *Jin Ping Mei* has attracted academic attention from several scholars. Sarah Dauncey (1999, 2003) noted the relationship between gift giving and power relations and argued that gifts create intimate connections, demonstrate status, and have the function of bribery and barter insofar as all the social connections in the work involve the transfer of money and wealth, usually in the form of gifts. Moreover, Ning Ma (2009) discussed the function of gifts in the procurement of fortunes in *Jin Ping Mei* when comparing material egoisms in the novel and *Robinson Crusoe*. Vesna Vučinić-Nešković (2012) argued that in *Jin Ping Mei*, gift exchange empowers the merchant Ximen Qing 西門慶 with political influence and provides corrupt bureaucrats with lucrative economic profits. Sophie Volpp (2013) stated that the narrative of gifts in *Jin Ping Mei* limits the readers' perception about the intrinsic value of the gifts but represents the gifts in circulation and exchange, while gifts such as python robes, as inalienable gifts, indicate unseemly social aspirations. Fuzhi Chen (2018) pointed out that as a common gift in *Jin Ping Mei*, handkerchiefs indicate social engagement, awards, and intimacy. The above studies have inspired this article, which investigates the theme of gift exchange in *Jin Ping Mei*. Previous studies have addressed the effect of gift exchange on depicting characters' social status and interaction, describing their procurement of fortunes and implying their social aspirations. However, although the gift exchange function centers on the interpersonal relationships of characters, there has been no research conducted on the social meaning and literary function of gift exchange from the perspective of *guanxi*. To investigate this meaning and function, the next section will discuss the origin of the gift exchange tradition in China.

### Chinese Li Culture

The convention of gift exchange originated in the pre-Qin dynasty (Paleolithic period–221 BCE) and determined the position of an individual in the hierarchy. The sinograph 禮 (*li*) was originally pictographic and resembled a picture of a ves-

sel containing two jades (璧), indicating that it was a vessel for sacrifice to the gods; later, it came to represent activities of religious sacrifice and political congregations (Li Yaoxian 1982). Hence, the character refers to a gift sacrificed to the gods or one's ancestors, ceremonies, or etiquette and propriety in sacrificial or political activities. Before Confucius, parts of the kingdom sent gifts to the royal family, similar to how the royal family sacrificed gifts to the gods and their ancestors. Hence, a stable hierarchy in the kingdom was achieved (Shen 2004; Li 2006). Additionally, through the practice of *li* but not the use of administrative means, a sense of solidarity among the regions was created. The gifts presented by the characters in *Jin Ping Mei* demonstrate the gift givers' social position—gift givers on a low hierarchical level usually initiate gift exchange with those of a higher social status. It is necessary for the characters in this work to participate in gift exchange because the exchange defines their hierarchical position in *guanxi*. In addition, through this exchange, social solidarity arises.

Given its focus on sacrifice and gift exchange, *li* also has meanings related to ritual, ceremony, propriety, courtesy, respect, etiquette, and norms of conduct. Chinese *li* culture was hence engendered. The practice of *li* was extensively utilized and preferred in imperial Chinese society (Lee and Lai 1978: 1308–12). *Li* was more important than *fa* 法, which is translated as “law.” *Fa* in imperial China commonly referred to decrees of the government and had a much narrower meaning in scope (Lee and Lai 1978: 1308–12). Additionally, the moral standard of *li* is much higher than that of *fa*, which only prescribes punishment for illegality (Lu 2020: 2). In premodern China, the stress on *fa* reached its zenith in the Qin dynasty of the third century BCE; however, throughout imperial China, *li* was a primary institution as a measure of rule. It “forbids trespasses *before* they are committed, whereas *fa* punishes criminal acts *after* their commission” (C. Chang 1960: 4). *Li* was so important in imperial China that it was interpreted as the principles and practices with which the interpenetration of the human and cosmic worlds was achieved by human intervention (Zito 1993).

Witnessing the function of *li* in the kingdom, Confucius (551–479 BCE) reiterated the importance of *li* in various situations—for example: “Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement which is contrary to propriety” (非禮勿視, 非禮勿聽, 非禮勿言, 非禮勿動) (Confucius 1861: 114); “To subdue one's self and return to propriety, is perfect virtue” (克己復禮為仁) (Confucius 1861: 114); and “If you do not learn the rules of propriety, your character cannot be established” (不學禮, 無以立) (Confucius 1861: 180).

Interpersonal relationships, or *guanxi*, are highlighted in the practice of *li*. In Confucianism, *li* is an “achieved propriety in one's roles and relations” (Ames 2011: 109) and involves exemplary conduct, embodied intelligence, developed dispositions, and deference (Hagen 2010). It is ingrained in Chinese daily life, as it is a cultural foundation (Li 2007). Ritualized by Confucianism, *li* gave rise to *guanxi* (Lo and Otis 2003: 136). Literature represents human relationships, which are referred to as *guanxi* in China. Thus, as an important aspect of *li*, gift exchange has become a theme in Chinese literature.

### Gift Exchange in the Ming Dynasty

*Jin Ping Mei* is a work of fiction reflecting the Ming dynasty (Carlitz 1984). From 1368 to 1644, the Ming dynasty witnessed continuing commercial expansion and even became the center of the world economy (Brook 1999). Commercialism promoted the social status of merchants and enhanced the collusion of the merchant and scholarly classes. The pursuit of economic profits changed the social ethos and particularly boosted the gift economy, which was characteristic of ancient China and led to the creation of obligations (Mullis 2008b: 176).

Confucianism had brought about the additional denigration of merchants. In Confucianism, merchants were regarded as mean people concerned mostly with profit. As Confucius remarked, “The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain” (君子喻于義, 小人喻於利) (Confucius 1861: 34). Merchants were viewed as adding nothing of value to society and hence ranked lowest in terms of social status among the four primary occupations in premodern China, which included *shi* 士 (“scholars and officials”), *nong* 農 (“farmers”), *gong* 工 (“artisans and craftsmen”), and *shang* 商 (“merchants”). Although some merchants exerted a significant influence during the Warring States period in China (475–221 BCE), Chinese society had been guided by the principle of “emphasizing agriculture and belittling commerce” before the sixteenth century (Yü 2016: 223–63).

After the prohibition of private trade ended in 1567 (Maddison 2006: 69) and merchants accumulated huge wealth through trading, the status of merchants soon rose in the late Ming dynasty. The Ming government even had to solicit funds from powerful merchants (Brook 1999: 90–93, 129–30). When merchants became increasingly rich and some became even richer than the emperor, the rigid separation between the scholar-official and merchant classes was abandoned (Slatyer 2015). Merchants could obtain official positions by passing civil service examinations or even by buying a passing grade. Numerous officials engaged in commercial business, and some merchants in the Ming dynasty were scholars in disguise (Fu 2020). Commercialism thus eventually raised the social status of the merchant class.

Significantly, to gain commercial profits, the merchant class colluded with the scholar-official class. Through this collusion, merchants obtained the protection of power and trading opportunities, while scholar-officials obtained a pecuniary income. The salaries of Ming officials were low, and until the mid-1400s, half of salaries were unpaid (Ni and Van 2006). Then concentrated official power, combined with these low salaries, nurtured inevitable corruption (Ni and Van 2006). Budgeting of governmental operating expenses in the Ming dynasty was below the necessary minimum, thereby exacerbating corruption (R. Huang 1974: 48). The corruption was so grave that dishonest officials who obtained wealth through bribery were praised and admired. Before the Jiajing 嘉靖 reign (1522–66), retired officials with righteous reputations were praised publicly, while after this period, people evaluated retired officials according to their wealth, not their moral qualities.<sup>1</sup> The income of officials through corruption in the Ming and Qing dynasties was between fourteen and twenty-two times their official income (Ni and Van 2006).

One of the essential ways both merchants and officials became rich was through bribery. *Guanxi* culture, which has thrived since the Ming dynasty (Han 2020), facilitated bribery. In *guanxi*, bribery is ostensibly not regarded as corruption but as gift giving and acceptance. In Confucianism, gift exchange is a necessary means of establishing and maintaining social relationships and creating obligation (Mullis 2008b). Under the cover of warm human sentiments, the exchange of gifts was de facto for instrumental and not purely sentimental purposes (Smart and Hsu 2007). With thriving commercialism and severe corruption, gift exchange, especially gift offerings to officials, was extremely popular in the Ming dynasty. The Ming scholar He Liangjun 何良俊 (1506–73) observed that one day before a Chinese New Year's Eve, those giving gifts to the officials of the Nanjing public security bureau were so numerous that they caused road congestion and even traffic jams.<sup>2</sup>

To facilitate gift exchange, building and maintaining *guanxi* were crucial. For example, in the civil service examination, the examinees would establish *guanxi* although they did not have any previous connections. Tan Qian 談遷 (1594–1658), a historian during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, recorded that, in his times, if the examinees for either military or civil positions had the same surname, no matter how great the distance between their families, they would build connections by calling each other brother, uncle, or nephew.<sup>3</sup> Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–82), a thinker during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, also highlighted the *guanxi* building between examiners and examinees who had passed the civil service examinations and gained official positions. He commented that in the Ming dynasty, the formation of such connections was public, although political factions had negative results (Wakeman 1972: 54–55; Elman 1989: 405).<sup>4</sup> The pseudo-familial connection established was a type of *guanxi* that could facilitate resource acquisition through gift exchange.

Chen Hongxu 陳弘緒 (1696–1771), a scholar in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, noted that to cover bribery, donors usually substituted beautiful pearls for refined gold as gifts.<sup>5</sup> On some occasions, when celebrations were held, officials prepared elegant and highly adorned scrolls with poems or paintings as gifts.<sup>6</sup> Such artworks were embedded in social relationships in the Ming dynasty (Clunas 2004). In these conditions, pearls and artwork, which differed from money in that they were elegant and precious, not only enabled bribery per se but also, more importantly, nurtured more affective ties through *guanxi*, which could further transactions among the participants.

As a ritualized exchange practiced within a Confucian culture and ethics, gift exchange had aesthetic significance, social importance, and customary significance (Mullis 2008a, 2008b). Facilitated by *guanxi*, gift exchange was pervasive in the Ming dynasty.

### Attributes of Gift Exchange in *Jin Ping Mei*

Influenced by Confucianism, the rituality of commonplace gift exchange is detailed in *Jin Ping Mei*. The gift exchanges of the characters in this work of fiction follow Confucian ritual. For example, although the semiliterate Ximen Qing



is a villain, once he presents a gift, he seriously aims to demonstrate the manner of a graceful Confucian scholar, who is well educated and hence more proficient in Confucian rituals. The Confucian ritual, or *li*, rationalizes and justifies Ximen Qing's gift exchange, at least on the surface.

Gift exchange in *Jin Ping Mei* is an endless interaction among the participants as long as *guanxi* is sustained. All the characteristics in *Jin Ping Mei* are involved in *guanxi*, a system of asymmetrical social exchanges in which the giver increases their prominence by providing substantial favors to the receiver, thus creating the obligation to return the favor in the future (Lin 2001). In the *guanxi* established by gift giving, these obligations must be reciprocated in the future (Ledeneva 2003). The mechanism originates from the Chinese understanding of *bao* (報, "repayment" or "retribution"), which is illustrated by the proverb "A drop of water shall be returned with a gushing spring" (*dishui zhi en, dang yongquan xiangbao* 滴水之恩, 當湧泉相報). Influenced by Confucianism, in premodern China, gift exchange was critical to maintain relationships and control others (Mullis 2008b). If the gift was retained, the relationship continued; otherwise, the relationship was rejected (Du 1996). Gift exchange among the characters, especially of Ximen Qing, is asymmetrical—the gift of one participant in *guanxi* is more valuable than that of the other. Under the conditions of *guanxi*, a form of asymmetrical exchange is guaranteed to continue (Barbalet 2018).

The emotional and affective bonds created by gift exchange are far more significant than the gifts themselves. Social exchange as *guanxi* is imbued with emotion, which contributes to the obligations of the participants (Barbalet 2018). The three fundamental ingredients of *guanxi*—*ganqing*, *renqing*, and *mianzi*—all contain affective and emotional factors. *Ganqing* literally implies emotional feelings or affective attachment (Chang 2010: 462). *Renqing* means both reciprocity and emotional factors, which "capture a broad spectrum of feelings" (Barbalet 2018: 941). *Mianzi*, implying dignity, prestige, or social status, also generates various emotions (Qi 2011). The narrative of the characters giving and receiving gifts is permeated with emotional or affective elements, although there is no explicit psychological description of them. For example, the gift exchange of Ximen Qing occurs consistently in a joyful atmosphere, which is even created intentionally with drinking and banquets to cover its instrumentality. Through the special sentimental atmosphere, gift exchange is not deemed an economic transaction but a voluntary and spontaneous social interaction that produces social capital. If considered only from the perspective of material price, gifts in *Jin Ping Mei* would have created economic capital but not social capital based on affective bonds, and hence there would have been no further potentially momentous social interactions.

The form of gift giving for *guanxi* in *Jin Ping Mei* seems disinterested, voluntary, and spontaneous; thus, it creates an atmosphere of generosity and graciousness. From the perspective of gift exchange theory, the reciprocity created by gifts should not be expected to occur immediately; it should be expected in the long run (Mauss 2002: 45–46). In the specific *guanxi* conditions of Chinese society, gift giving should not only be carried out without the expectation of immediate repayment but should also exclude explicit acknowledgement of instrumental use

rather than an absence of an awareness about it (Smart 1993: 395). Thus, the emotions and sentiment involved in gift giving in *guanxi* are emphasized. On various occasions of gift exchange, Ximen Qing mentions that goods or money are only a gift and one should not expect them to be repaid. Furthermore, he never worries about the lack of gifts repaid to him and emphasizes the brotherhood and affective bond of *guanxi*.

### The Role of Gift Exchange in Plot Creation

The asymmetry of gift exchange propels narrative development. In *Jin Ping Mei*, gift exchange is never symmetric. For example, in *guanxi* with the other high-level officials, the gifts Ximen Qing gives are much better than the gifts he receives. This is demonstrated by his communication with Censor Song.

For his first meeting with Censor Song in chapter 49, Ximen Qing prepares an extremely luxurious banquet with one thousand taels of silver. He presents Censor Song with gold and silver utensils together with the food on his table, a pair of ivory chopsticks, two jars of wine, two sheep, two rolls of red silk, and two pairs of golden flowers. Even Censor Song's servants receive fifty bottles of wine, one hundred measures of cooked meat, and five hundred cakes. However, Censor Song presents Ximen Qing only with a red visiting card on which is written simply "With the respectful compliments of Song Qiaonian" (侍生宋喬年拜).

The second meeting between Ximen Qing and Censor Song occurs during a banquet for Grand Marshal Huang 黃太尉 in chapter 65, which Ximen Qing arranges in his residence according to Censor Song's requirements. By rights, this banquet and the gifts for Grand Marshal Huang should be prepared by the other participating bureaucrats; however, Censor Song insists that Ximen Qing arrange the banquet because Ximen Qing has both a splendid residence and great wealth. After the banquet, Censor Song hypocritically tells Ximen Qing that if the latter's money is not adequate for the banquet, they will make up for any deficiency.

The third meeting between them occurs as a result of Censor Song's suggestion to arrange a banquet for Inspector General Hou 侯巡撫 in chapter 74. During his visit to Ximen Qing's residence, Censor Song notices a magnificent, gilded tripod and praises its beauty, asking Ximen Qing where he got it. The next morning, Ximen Qing orders two soldiers to give the tripod to Censor Song as a gift.

Superficially, Ximen Qing gains almost nothing material directly from Censor Song compared to the costly gifts he gives. However, he obtains unprecedented political influence in his local area through Censor Song. With the help of Censor Song, his relatives and those who bribe him gain official advancement. Additionally, through Censor Song's manipulation, Ximen Qing acquires the opportunity to purchase historic works of art from which he will gain a profit of four thousand taels of silver with seed money of only five thousand taels of silver.

More important, through the frequent asymmetry of gift exchange, *guanxi* is set in eternal motion. *Guanxi* is not sustained by symmetric economic transactions, which cannot create indebtedness and hence obligation. Only when the gift exchange is asymmetrical can indebtedness and obligations be created, the basis on which *guanxi* is sustained. The imbalance of favors, or the condition that one party



owes another party, is the perpetual state of *guanxi* (Lin 2001: 158). In the *guanxi* between him and other bureaucrats, Ximen Qing donates gifts that are much more precious than those the bureaucrats present. Thus, he intentionally creates a conspicuously asymmetrical gift exchange, which results in the obligation and indebtedness of the bureaucrats as well as the maintenance of *guanxi*. However, what Ximen Qing receives from the *guanxi* far outweighs the price of the gifts he sends out. With the favoritism provided by the bureaucrats, he not only procures splendid economic profit in business but also obtains swift advancement in his official career. The profit and advancement procured from *guanxi* enable him to continue his gift exchange. Conversely, the gift exchange perpetuates their *guanxi*.

The asymmetry of gift exchange exists throughout *guanxi*. Another example is in chapter 39, in which Daoist Priest Wu 吳道士 presents gifts to Ximen Qing for the spring festival celebration. The gifts include prayers to the kitchen god, charms for the coming spring, heaven and earth pictures, and four other boxes of gifts. Ximen Qing soon gives Daoist Priest Wu a tael of silver, and after the spring festival, he presents a measure of fine rice, five *jin*<sup>7</sup> of incense, ten *jin* of official candles, a supply of paper money, sixteen rolls of unbleached material, two jars of southern wine, two rolls of brocade, four live chickens, four live geese, a set of pig trotters, one leg of mutton, and ten taels of silver, all of which cost far more than the gift he accepted.<sup>8</sup>

The asymmetry of gift exchange does not mean that one participant is always in a position of providing more expensive gifts to the other. The changing of the hierarchical positions of the participants would influence whether one participant in *guanxi* should provide less or more expensive gifts to the other. However, gift exchange is always asymmetrical. For example, before he is appointed vice captain and deputy magistrate of Shandong Province in chapter 30, Ximen Qing presents expensive gifts to local officials. However, in chapter 31, when the news that he has received those official ranks spreads locally, both bureaucrats and commoners donate abundant gifts to congratulate him. A local bureaucrat, Magistrate Li 李知縣 of Qinghe County, who had previously accepted Ximen Qing's gifts, upon hearing about Ximen Qing's appointment to an official position higher than his own, now agonizes over how to present him with appropriate gifts.

The continuous asymmetric gift exchange is critical to guaranteeing the continuity of the plot. In the *guanxi* network, asymmetric gift exchange results in obligation, which must be paid back in the future. To reciprocate, a new asymmetry will be formed in the exchange; hence, it propels further exchange in *guanxi*. Therefore, continuity in the plot is ensured by the gift. For example, the gift Ximen Qing presents to Censor Song is far more precious and costly than the gift presented by the latter and thus forms a distinct asymmetry. To reciprocate Ximen Qing's gifts, Censor Song provides special favoritism, which can bring about much more economic or political profit to the former through his official power than that from the gifts he accepts. Thus, a new asymmetry is formed, and the plot continues as a result of the gift exchange.

In the seemingly monotonous continuity of gift exchange, suspense is created in the plot, and the curiosity of the reader is hence piqued. Ever since Aristotle,

Western literary narrative has been adept at establishing suspense in a narrative, which can create curiosity. For example, to establish suspense, the narrator can describe the results of an event at the beginning of the work and then narrate the reasons for these results in sequence. As traditional Chinese fiction narratives often relate stories in chronological order, suspense seems difficult to establish. However, the narrative of gift exchanges in *Jin Ping Mei* naturally results in curiosity, although this work does not conform to the Western narrative tradition. In the frequent gift exchange narratives, the situation, quality, and quantity of reciprocation are undefined, even though the gift giving in *guanxi* must be reciprocated in the future due to the social capital of obligation and the trust created by it. Therefore, suspense is created with regard to the upcoming reciprocation. For example, in the above-mentioned case, the reader's curiosity about the subsequent reciprocation is inspired by the extravagant gifts presented by Ximen Qing.

Furthermore, gift presentation, which is frequent in the work, leads to turning points in the characters' lives and fortunes. Therefore, the narrative of gift presentation ensures narrative coherence. John L. Bishop (1956) claimed that Ming fictional narratives are marked by plots with an episodic quality and the imperfect integration of content. However, the narrative of gift presentation in *Jin Ping Mei* renders a typical narrative coherence. Through gift presentation, the gift giver acquires a new hierarchical identity and earns his new fortunes. Accordingly, the narrative continues and maintains a genuine coherence.

This phenomenon is illustrated by the narrative of Ximen Qing's contacts with Grand Tutor Cai Jing 蔡京太師, his ultimate political patron, or *kaoshan* (靠山, "backer"), who is the most powerful and highest-level official in Ximen Qing's *guanxi* network. Ximen Qing's first contact with Cai Jing is indirect. In chapter 10, Ximen Qing asks his relative Chen Hong 陳洪 to implore Marshal Yang 楊提督, the provincial commander in chief, to intervene in Ximen Qing's case concerning Wu Da 武大, who was murdered by Ximen Qing because of Ximen Qing's fornication with Wu Da's wife, Pan Jinlian. Marshal Yang then seeks help from Grand Tutor Cai Jing, who later orders his own subordinate bureaucrat Chen Wenzhao 陳文昭 to protect Ximen Qing and punish Wu Song 武松, Wu Da's brother and Ximen Qing's antagonist in the case. The second contact between Ximen Qing and Cai Jing, in chapter 14, is also indirect. This time, Ximen Qing's mistress Li Ping'er 李瓶兒, who later becomes his concubine, asks Ximen Qing to save her husband, Hua Zixu 花子虛, in prison. Through Ximen Qing's relative Chen Hong and Chen Hong's relative Marshal Yang, Ximen Qing presents gifts to Cai Jing, who later orders the release of Hua Zixu. These two occasions of gift presenting cost Ximen Qing little money because he obtains favoritism through Marshal Yang's *mianzi*.

In chapter 18, however, the situation changes in his third contact with Cai Jing. This time, his relative Marshal Yang is removed from office and sent to prison. Hence, as a relative of Marshal Yang, Ximen Qing might become embroiled in the case, which could bring disaster to him. He is frightened and urgently goes to Cai Jing for help. The servants he sends out meet the son of Cai Jing, who accepts their gift—five hundred measures of the purest rice. With the latter's introduction, the servants meet the bureaucrat in charge of the case, who accepts their gift—five

hundred taels of silver and gold—and hence protects Ximen Qing. This time, the downfall of his relative Marshal Yang means he loses his *kaoshan*; therefore, he needs to seek out a new *kaoshan*. Generous gifts now begin to play a key role.

Therefore, in his fourth contact with Cai Jing, Ximen Qing sends out servants to present lavish gifts to Cai Jing for the latter's birthday in chapter 27. Aside from four sets of dragon robes<sup>9</sup> provided by Li Ping'er, he presents four silver-cast figures holding gold flagons with the character *shou* (壽, "long life")<sup>10</sup> engraved on them and peach-shaped cups made of jade. Such gifts are not only lavish but also—critically—inalienable, unique, and distinct in that the figures contained artwork, which conveys the implication of affection and indicates the gift giver's special blessing on the receiver. Hence, his gifts for Cai Jing seem not to be bribery but a thoughtful way to celebrate Cai Jing's birthday. Naturally, his lavish gifts are noticed by Cai Jing. In recognition of his gifts, Cai Jing not only appoints Ximen Qing vice-captain and deputy magistrate of Shandong but also nominates his servants for different bureaucratic positions. Thus, Cai Jing becomes his new *kaoshan*.

The life and fortune of Ximen Qing, because of this gift presentation, suddenly reach a turning point—he obtains an official position and hence gains a new hierarchical position. Then, in his *guanxi* network, the recipients of his gifts, who were once ranked higher than him, begin to seek ways to present gifts to him because all social individuals in the *guanxi* network should engage in gift exchange, as it instantiates the hierarchy and defines an individual's hierarchical place (Mullis 2008b); to refrain from giving and receiving, which denotes refraining from reciprocity, is to lose rank (Mauss 2002: 53). The events create a new situation due to the exchange of gifts.

The gifts presented in the following two contacts with Cai Jing also create a turning point for Ximen Qing's life and fortune. His fifth contact with Cai Jing, which occurs in chapter 27, happens on account of a salt merchant being sent to prison. This time, Ximen Qing presents one thousand taels of silver to Cai Jing, who, upon seeing the gift, orders the release of the merchant. In addition, impressed by these gifts, Cai Jing invites Ximen Qing to attend his upcoming birthday celebration. In the sixth contact with Cai Jing, in chapter 55, Ximen Qing brings sumptuous gifts in person over a long distance from Shandong Province to the capital to celebrate Cai Jing's birthday. The gifts include dragon robes, silk, and gold flowers. Through his impressive gifts, Ximen Qing procures an opportunity to adopt Cai Jing as his godfather, which enhances their *guanxi* as a pseudo-familial connection. Therefore, he changes his hierarchical position and fortune yet again—after the gift presentation, he is promoted to the position of magistrate from deputy magistrate.

In this way, Ximen Qing's gifts induce the development of the narrative. Without these gifts, he would have received no personal security, business success, official appointments, or promotions, and accordingly, the plot would not have progressed. With the affective attributes of these gifts, he creates a nebulous obligation for Cai Jing. Otherwise, once the obligations were made explicit, it would have been perceived as something other than a gift exchange, such as blatant bribery (Smart 1993). Additionally, his gift-presenting process conforms to the Confucian

li rule, which supports traditional orthodox forms of authority and hierarchy (Bell 1997). Hence, the gifts become social capital, which is the trust and obligation between Ximen Qing and Cai Jing, but not economic capital. In the future, social capital can be converted to economic or political profits, which are more precious than the cost of the gifts themselves and contribute to changing the fortune of the characters. Thus, the plot develops consequentially.

### Disclosing the Inner World through the Gift Exchange Narrative

Compared to Western fiction, premodern Chinese fiction does not attach great importance to direct psychological descriptions. To make up for this, authors inserted songs and lyrics to describe the inner worlds of the characters, which include intention, feelings, and affection. The narrative of *Jin Ping Mei* is often interrupted by songs and lyrics. For example, in chapter 52, to describe the inner world of Li Guijie 李桂姐, a song titled “Yellow Warbler” (huangying'er 黃鶯兒) is inserted into the narrative. The song expresses her concerns about her lover Wang Sanguan 王三官, who is in prison.

Another important way to represent the characters' inner worlds is through the narrative of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* not only involves ostensible interactions between the participants but also, critically, represents an arena of emotional practice (Barbalet 2018). Emotion and affection are essential in *guanxi* in that they can transform into social capital, which is critical to social interaction.

Gift exchange involves entanglement in emotion and affection in *guanxi*. Through gift giving, emotion and affection in human connections are perpetuated (Kipnis 1997). In terms of emotion and affection, gift exchange involves all three ingredients of *guanxi*: *ganqing*, *renqing*, and *mianzi*. *Ganqing* is nurtured by empathy originating in the gift exchange (Chen and Chen 2004; Zhuang, Xi, and Tsang 2010). *Renqing*, built up by gift exchange (Yang 1994), includes both reciprocal obligation and feelings (Chen and Chen 2004; Barbalet 2018: 8—that is, in *renqing*, the boundary between human feeling and obligation is blurred. *Mianzi*, which refers to social honor and self-respect (Yang 1994: 141) and hence belongs to the realm of feelings, affection, and emotion, can be promoted by gift exchange in social interaction (Xu 2018). Additionally, the feelings, emotions, and affections are all formative elements and consequences of gift exchange (Barbalet 2018).

However, that sentimentality is combined with instrumentality in gift exchange is complicated. The obligation created by gift exchange has to be repaid in the future. Both the gift giver and the recipient are deceiving themselves about the generosity and voluntary nature of the gift presentation, as they fail to acknowledge the instrumental use of gifts in the performance (Smart 1993). Otherwise, a blatant intention to obligate will result in the failure of gift exchange—that is, only if affective and emotional interaction covers the instrumental function of gift exchange can the participants profit from the process.

The combination of sentimentality and instrumentality in gift exchange provides a stage for *Jin Ping Mei* to represent the characters' inner worlds. Like other premodern Chinese works of fiction, *Jin Ping Mei* has no direct psychological analysis. Characterization in Chinese fiction is done through describing the

appearance and action of the characters, stressing their actions and speech without describing their inner worlds, in contrast to Western fiction, which “excels in subtle psychological description” (Huang 2018: 14–15). Rather than describing the inner worlds of characters directly, this work of fiction exposes and reveals the intricate psychological states of characters by detailing their speech and behavior during gift exchange.

In *Jin Ping Mei*, the narrative of speech and behavior in gift exchange reflects the inner worlds of the participants. The relationship between *guanxi* and gift exchange is conventional and ingrained in Chinese culture; hence, for Chinese readers, the emotion and affection in gift exchange are easy to understand. In particular, the absence of direct psychological description sparks the imagination of the reader. Every gift exchange in *Jin Ping Mei* is a means to express emotion and affection. For example, the gift of the braised pig head specifically prepared for Wu Yueniang in chapter 23 indicates the concubines’ respect for her (Liang 2014).

Another typical instance of gift exchange representing characters’ intricate inner worlds is the gift presented by the courtesan Zheng Aiyue 鄭愛月 to Ximen Qing. In chapter 67, Zheng Aiyue, a savvy and sophisticated courtesan, presents, through her brother Zheng Chun 鄭春, a box of pastries with fruit fillings to Ximen Qing, a box of pastries shaped like spiral shells, and a red silk handkerchief with embroidered hearts, parceled in which are melon seeds cracked with her own teeth. As a courtesan, she endeavors to ingratiate herself with Ximen Qing, who is rich, powerful, and able to provide her with protection and wealth. To build and reinforce *guanxi* with the latter, she adopts an original approach to presenting gifts to Ximen Qing in order to improve the *ganqing* between them. Her gifts, although inexpensive, display her affection and passion for the recipient—the pastries are selected by her, and she cracked the melon seeds with her own teeth; additionally, the handkerchief with hearts is a clear representation of her inner thoughts. Compared to other gifts that are expensive but have no affective attributes, all her gifts, selected and personalized for Ximen Qing, demonstrate her sincere feelings. Although her motivation is completely profit-seeking—as a courtesan, she must utilize her own youth and beauty to accrue wealth while she can—she presents her gifts as not instrumental but sentimental. On account of her unique gift presentation, Ximen Qing soon indulges her. There is no direct description of the characters’ inner worlds in this episode, but the *ganqing*, or affective ties between the two, is vividly exposed by the narrative of their behaviors and words.

The most momentous representation of an inner world through the gift exchange narrative in *Jin Ping Mei* is Ximen Qing’s gift exchange, which provides the basic impetus for the narrative. The gift exchange between Ximen Qing and the bureaucrats is virtually instrumental. With their unprecedentedly low salaries, Ming bureaucrats, in order to maintain a decent living, were forced or willing to accept gifts or bribes from merchants when commercialism prospered, and the social status of the merchant class rose as their wealth grew (Shao Jinkai and Hao Honggui 2001; Chen 2004). In its historical context, it is natural for *Jin Ping Mei* to show that through gift exchange with bureaucrats, Ximen Qing can reap huge economic profits in business and

swiftly advance in his official career. However, the instrumental purpose of gift exchange is masked by or combined with sentimental display.

For example, in chapter 36, Comptroller Zhai 翟管家, who recommends Zhuangyuan Cai 蔡狀元 to Ximen Qing,<sup>11</sup> tells him that Cai has no money and suggests that Ximen Qing lend some to Cai and that Comptroller Zhai will return the money in the future. Considering the political potential of Cai, Ximen Qing presents a generous gift to Cai without hesitation and never mentions repayment. He presents the latter with a roll of gold silk, two rolls of silk for making collars, one hundred taels of white gold, and five hundred pieces of storax in addition to a luxurious banquet, music, dance, games, and comfortable accommodations. In the gift-giving process, both the giver and the recipient indulge themselves in a pretension that the gift is not motivated by self-interest; otherwise, the gift would be deemed a bribe (Bourdieu 1977: 5–6). In the process, the bureaucrats profit economically from the wealth of Ximen Qing; likewise, the latter takes advantage of political favoritism from the bureaucrats. Although his strategy is to make the maximum profit from his *guanxi* with the recipient, the gift exchange does not seem like blatant bribery because the readers see only *ganqing*, *renqing*, and *mianzi*, or sentimental elements, in their *guanxi* network. The complicated emotional interactions and affective bonds, although a form of self-deception, are highlighted through their speech and behavior, despite there being literally no psychological description.

By accommodating Cai, Ximen Qing is extremely humble, polite, and considerate. Through his gifts, he endeavors to show his generosity and willingness to help Cai with no strings attached. Additionally, the lavish and joyful banquet before the gift presentation creates a highly convivial atmosphere for the presentation; the unwilling farewell between them also augments the gratitude for the gift and accommodation. The drinking and music, conforming to Confucian ritual requirements, rationalize the gift giving and hence justify the men's affective ties in the *guanxi* connection. By the gift giving, *ganqing* is reinforced, *renqing* increases, and *mianzi* is augmented.

However, their affection or emotion by no means occurs out of friendship based on “mutual affection and sympathy”; rather, it “presumes a much more specific common interest” (Fried 1969: 226). In the writings of Confucians, equality of friendship was undercut; in addition to that, Confucianism emphasizes the inferiority of friendship to other social connections and hence lessens the power of friendship (Kutcher 2000). There is no mention of friends in Ximen Qing's primary *guanxi*. In the aforementioned case, facing Ximen Qing, Cai calls himself “your pupil” (*xuesheng* 學生). To Censor Song, Ximen Qing calls himself “your humble servant” (*pu* 僕). Such titles embed their connections within a hierarchical order. In the hierarchy, gift exchange with sentiment is for and of the common interest—that is, sentiment in gift exchange relates to an instrumental purpose.

Hence, the instrumental and sentimental roles of gift exchange are not mutually exclusive as a dichotomy. Especially in Chinese culture, the concept of *qing* 情, which represents sentiment, affection, emotion, passion, love, situation, circumstance, and reason in various conditions but which has no equivalent translation



in English, combines reason and subjective dimensions and hence contrasts with the tradition of René Descartes's culture in Europe, which stresses the opposition between reason and passion (Santangelo 2015). In many episodes of *Jin Ping Mei*, the instrumental goal is realized by sentimental measures, and it may be that one cannot separate instrumental goals and sentimental processes unambiguously. For example, in the case of presenting gifts to Ximen Qing, Zheng Aiyue manipulates the sentimental gifts for her instrumental and commercial purposes, as has been analyzed above. Another example is that when presenting bountiful gifts to bureaucrats such as Cai, Ximen Qing humbly tells him that his gift is a trifling object and is nothing more than a token, never mentioning the repayment of the gift, as if it truly does not need to be paid back: all the gifts are de facto reciprocal in various forms and by diverse means. Additionally, deceived by the gift exchange mechanism, both givers and recipients are embedded in an affective atmosphere, which facilitates their transactions and fortifies their *guanxi*. The seemingly absurd affective and emotional experience is just what the narrative of *Jin Ping Mei* represents. However, direct psychological descriptions cannot easily portray such a complicated state of *qing*, as they combine sentimental and instrumental constituents. Through the characters' behavior and speech in gift exchange, *qing*, or the inner worlds of the characters, can be efficiently exposed.

All the major characters in *Jin Ping Mei* are proficiently and unavoidably involved in gift exchange. Their adroit manipulations of gift exchange increase the obscurity of the boundary between the instrumentality and sentimentality of gifts. For instance, in seeking fortune, Ximen Qing expertly combines sentimentality and instrumentality to facilitate his gift exchange. To take full advantage of gift exchanges, he chooses festivals, birthdays, or other celebratory occasions to present gifts. Among the seven times he presents gifts to Cai Jing, two are birthday celebrations for the latter. When the spring festival approaches,<sup>12</sup> he begins to send gifts to various bureaucrats, as shown in the gift presented in chapter 78, which relates that he closes his office on December 24.<sup>13</sup> This indicates that Ximen Qing is busy arranging gifts on this date, seven days before the spring festival. Celebratory occasions and festivals, especially the spring festival, are ideal moments for gift presentations in that the gift donor needs no extra excuse to present gifts (Ledeneva 2018: 134). More importantly, such occasions, which provide a joyful atmosphere, can easily improve the affective bond between the participants in the gift exchange. Additionally, on such occasions, the presentation of gifts seems to be motivated by the celebration and not by other purposes. This not only exacerbates the self-deception regarding the motivation for the gift exchange but also increases the social capital generated by the exchange. On such occasions, the boundary between the sentimental and instrumental purposes of gift exchange is further blurred. Therefore, using the narrative of gift exchange to expose the inner world is an optimal choice for psychological descriptions.

## Conclusion

This article set out to discuss the social and literary function of gift exchange in the narrative of *Jin Ping Mei*. Full of episodes of gift exchange, this novel effectively

develops its plot and depicts the inner worlds of the characters. The literary function of gift exchange is decided by the ubiquitous *guanxi* network in which all the characters are completely involved.

Asymmetrical gift exchange is effective in building, sustaining, and reinforcing *guanxi*, by which characters procure material or social resources. Therefore, gift exchange is fundamental to social connections. Asymmetrical gift exchange propels plot development, generates suspense, and hence piques the curiosity of the reader.

The narrative of gift exchange is also an effective way to expose the inner worlds of the characters, given the lack of direct psychological descriptions. The sentimental and instrumental purposes of gift exchange as a part of *guanxi* are not dichotomous, but they blur boundaries. Thus, the gift exchange narrative provides an arena within which to achieve psychological analysis. Through the description of behavior and speech during gift exchange, these inner worlds can be exposed clearly.

In the *li* culture and given the ubiquity of *guanxi*, gift exchange is quotidian in Chinese society. Correspondingly, gift exchange inevitably becomes an important theme in Chinese fictional narratives. Since *li* culture and *guanxi* have been embedded and persistent in Chinese culture, the gift exchange narrative will comprise a critical perspective from which to interpret Chinese fiction.

## NOTES

1. *Fengsu ji* 風俗記 [A record of custom] in *Xinhui Xianzhi* 新會縣誌卷之二 [Gazetteer of Xinhui County, vol. 2] in the Wanli reign, edited by Wang Mingxuan 王命璿, Huang Chun 黃淳, and Li Yilong 李以龍. “When officials retired, people evaluated them according to their wealth but not their moral quality” (仕之歸也, 不問人品, 第問懷金多寡為輕重).

2. “When I went out to visit a friend one month before a spring festival, I found that there were so many hampers before the public security bureau that they caused road congestion and even traffic jams. Astonished, I asked about the accident. People told me that the high-status families in the city were presenting festival gifts to the public security” (餘嘗以除夕前一月偶出外訪客。至內橋, 見中城兵馬司前食盒塞道, 至不得行。餘怪問之, 曰: “此中城各大家至兵馬處送節物也”) (He 1997: 103).

3. “Recently, as long as the examinees have the same surname, then regardless of wherever they live, they will always connect with each other as one clan and refer to their relations as uncle, nephew, or brothers” (近時凡文武科第姓同者, 無論殊方遐域, 輒聯宗叙叔侄兄弟) (Tan 1960: 352).

4. “While in the Ming dynasty, they publicly called each other masters or disciples. Then the disaster caused by factionalism was still not less than that in the Tang dynasty” (而至於有明, 則遂公然謂之座師, 謂之門生, 乃其朋黨之禍, 亦不減于唐矣) (Gu 2006: 994–95).

5. “The bribery is so prevalent . . . that recently, they replaced fine gold with beautiful pearls, which are easy to carry and able to be concealed from others” (賄賂之盛 . . . 近又以美珠代精金, 其挾持尤易, 而人不覺也) (Chen Hongxu 1985: 14).

6. Fan Lian (範廉, 1605–41) recorded, “Recently, it has become a common practice for scholars and officials to have poems or paintings engraved on pamphlets or scrolls made of high-quality golden paint on festive occasions as an effort to flatter those in power. Decorated with splendid covers and jade rollers, these pamphlets and scrolls look precious and impressive” (近來各學及士夫承奉有司, 每遇慶賀, 必用上等泥金冊頁手卷, 偏索詩畫。裝綴錦套玉軸, 極其琛重) (Fan Lian 1983: 7).

7. *Jin* 斤 is a unit of weight. It equals approximately half a kilogram.

8. The price of the widely used paper after the Wanli reign (1573–1620) was 0.026 tael of silver for one hundred pieces (Chow 2010). Among the gifts the Daoist presents to Ximen Qing, the gifts mentioned specifically, such as charms, pictures, and prayers, are made of paper. This indicates that the prices of the gifts he presents is much less than that of the gifts presented to him later by Ximen Qing.

9. Dragon robes in the Ming dynasty were extremely luxurious. In particular, the four sets of robes were from the imperial palace where Li Ping'er's second husband's relative worked.

10. *Shou* 壽 is a character meaning a prayer to bless someone with a long life.

11. Zhuangyuan 狀元 is the person who ranks first in the palace examinations in imperial China.

12. The spring festival (*chunjie* 春節) is the biggest holiday in China.

13. This is according to the Chinese calendar.

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