

Article

The Logic of Legalism in a Society of Desire: Profit and Tactics in *Jin Ping Mei*

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Abstract: This article explores *Jin Ping Mei* through the lens of Han Feizi's Legalist philosophy, arguing that the novel presents a literary embodiment of a society governed by profit (li) and tactics (shu). As Confucian ethics recede, a Legalist logic dominates both domestic and public life, exemplified by Ximen Qing's manipulation of power, relationships, and law. Drawing on Han Feizi's triad of fa (law), shu (tactics), and shi (power), the study shows how these tools of governance are corrupted through their application in a secular, tactical society. The collapse of Ximen's network reveals the internal instability of Legalist order when stripped of ethical restraint. Rather than offering moral resolution, *Jin Ping Mei* functions as a critical reflection on the cost of rule by strategy alone. The article contributes to cross-disciplinary discourse on Chinese political thought, literature, and the crisis of moral order.

Keywords: Legalism; *Jin Ping Mei*; Han Feizi

1. Introduction

As the first full-length novel in the history of Chinese literature to depict urban life, *Jin Ping Mei* is intricately bound up with the theme of desire. Whether in Ximen Qing's manipulation of power and sexuality, Pan Jinlian's calculating passion, or the opportunism of petty characters such as Ying Bojue, the narrative constructs a secular order centered on profit. The relationships among characters exhibit a distinct trend of moral disengagement: traditional Confucian ethics no longer exert substantive restraint; morality is reduced to ornamental rhetoric, while the true logic governing interpersonal interactions becomes one of quantifiable, exchangeable, and calculable interests. This frenzy for profit not only dismantles the ethical foundations of family, society, and state, but also prompts a deeper inquiry: in a world where morality has collapsed, what force, if any, can still sustain social order?

What is striking is that this operational logic — driven by unbridled desire — uncannily echoes the worldview of Legalist thought, particularly that of Han Feizi. According to Han Feizi, it is in human nature to pursue benefit and avoid harm [1]. The governance model he constructs rests on this premise of self-interest, regulating complex social behaviors through the coordinated use of fa (law), shu (tactics), and shi (power). While *Jin Ping Mei* is not a political treatise, it offers — through literary means — a remarkably Legalist vision of social operation: the family becomes a transactional unit, the judiciary a tool for the collusion of power and wealth, and religion is depicted in ways that reflect attempts to reconcile material desire with lingering moral concerns. This is not incidental, but rather a projection of systemic logic into the fabric of everyday life — a literary instantiation of Han Feizi's principle of "governing in accordance with human nature".

This article centers on the dual themes of profit and tactics to reassess the structures of desire and modes of governance in *Jin Ping Mei*, and to ask whether the novel unconsciously enacts a literary translation of Legalism. It raises three main questions. First, how does *Jin Ping Mei* construct a Legalist model of society through its portrayals of economic

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activity, family arrangements, and interpersonal networks? Second, in the aftermath of Confucian ethical collapse, does the novel reflect any effort to reconstitute a functional logic of governance through shu (tactics)? Third, does the novel's depiction of the tactical operability of social behavior serve as a grassroots enactment of Han Feizi's idea of "rule by tactics"? Through these inquiries, the article seeks to uncover the intertextual resonance between *Jin Ping Mei* and the thought of Han Feizi, opening new paths for research on the intersection of Chinese classical literature and political philosophy.

2. The Infiltration of Profit and the Construction of Desire in *Jin Ping Mei*

Set in the fictional city of Qinghe, *Jin Ping Mei* delineates a market-oriented social landscape driven by the logic of li (profit). From domestic power struggles to urban conspiracies, from marriage as transaction to judicial corruption, the novel portrays a Legalist order stripped of moral pretense. Its realist narrative tactic underscores characters who exhibit traits of the "rational economic actor". Their emotions, decisions, and social interactions are all guided by the imperative to maximize personal gain. This behavioral pattern, rooted in utility, reflects not merely an ethical collapse but a structural transformation: as the Confucian moral order erodes silently, literature begins to mirror a mode of survival-oriented pragmatism, transforming ethics into mere tactics of subsistence.

Ximen Qing, as the central figure in a local power network, personifies the logic of profit with near-total precision. Through a series of marriages, he accumulates both economic capital and social leverage: marrying Meng Yulou consolidates his position in commerce; accepting Li Ping'er grants him direct access to financial assets; marrying Zhuo Diu'er, daughter of Wang Liuer, expands his influence into new social spheres. His marital strategy thus becomes an institutionalized mechanism of capital operation. The veiled rivalry between Pan Jinlian and Li Ping'er for the status of "favored wife" is not merely fueled by jealousy but also underscores a struggle over access to household resources and influence. Behind the phrase "fighting for affection" lie calculated struggles over jewelry, domestic control, and inheritance. There are no purely virtuous wives or self-sacrificing mothers in this narrative — only strategic actors adjusting their behavior according to fluctuating incentives. As Han Feizi succinctly states, "It is human nature to seek benefit and avoid harm". In this microcosmic household structure, moral sentiment becomes a performative resource rather than an internal compass; power is distributed according to the logic of interest, not ethical entitlement.

Even more revealing is how the infiltration of li extends far beyond domestic life to permeate Qinghe's public sphere. Through his management of social ties, manipulation of the legal system, and control of trade networks, Ximen Qing constructs a multi-dimensional structure that fuses economic capital with political power. Characters such as Ying Bojue, Xie Xida, Hua Zixu, and Han Daoguo orbit around him not out of loyalty or righteousness, but because of the predictable material benefits he offers. Banquets, poetic gatherings, and the gifting of silver and gold serve merely as ornamental façades for the negotiation of interests. This instrumentalist configuration of social relations mirrors the Legalist worldview of Han Feizi, who rejected a priori morality and instead grounded his social philosophy in a candid recognition of self-interest [1]. In the world of *Jin Ping Mei*, everyone calculates. Social cohesion is no longer held together by renyi li (benevolence, righteousness, propriety), but by li (profit), coordinated through shu (tactics).

The novel's depiction of public authority is deeply ironic. Ximen Qing's meteoric rise from drug merchant to judicial officer bypasses the civil examination system; it is achieved through bribery and connections with powerful patrons in the political establishment. Once in office, he governs through shu, displacing fa (law) with shi (power). In the case of Miao Qing's murder, for instance, he accepts a bribe of one thousand taels and alters the legal record, allowing the actual killer to go free. Such incidents are recurrent: the law ceases to function as a neutral mechanism of justice and becomes a pliable instrument in

the service of private interest. Even higher-ranking officials, such as the censor Song Qiaonian, are complicit in these exchanges, forming a top-down network of corruption. Though the judiciary retains the form of legal procedure, it has already been subsumed by what Han Feizi described as *ming yu li jiao zhi* (the crossing of name and profit) — a system where justice is replaced by the monetization of authority. Law no longer deters wrongdoing; it enables profit. Power commands, and people pursue gain.

Within Han Feizi's Legalist framework, the triad of *fa* (law), *shu* (tactics), and *shi* (power) constitutes the foundational logic of governance [1,2]. He presumes that human beings are inherently self-interested, and that only well-calibrated systems of rewards and punishments, strategic manipulation, and centralized power can secure social order. Yet this model presupposes a rational sovereign — someone who exercises control over *fa-shu-shi* in service of the state. In *Jin Ping Mei*, however, these mechanisms are "downgraded" to street-level pragmatics. What should have been public instruments — *shu* and *shi* — become tools for private accumulation in the hands of Ximen Qing. *Fa* loses its function as an impartial legal framework; *shi* becomes a tool for monopolizing markets; *shu* devolves into the art of managing households and bribing officials. This downward transposition of Legalist governance exposes the vulnerabilities of Han Feizi's system when stripped of institutional constraints: it becomes personalized, vulgarized, and ultimately weaponized for exploitation. This critique sets the stage for later discussions on the self-dissolution of Legalist order.

In *Jin Ping Mei*, *li* is not only the motive force behind individual action, but the minimal shared denominator for sustaining social order. In the absence of ethical norms, only profit retains functional efficacy — however volatile or corrosive that efficacy may be. The novel refrains from overt judgment, yet Ximen Qing's spectacular rise and abrupt demise offer an institutional warning. *Jin Ping Mei* does not glorify Legalism; it interrogates it. It constructs a world organized by *li* and then exposes its instability and moral bankruptcy.

In this light, the presence of *li* in *Jin Ping Mei* is not simply a symbol of moral decay, but a structural force in the reconfiguration of social order and governance logic. It runs through familial bonds, marriages, lawsuits, and economic exchanges, deeply embedded in the fabric of late-Ming secular life. The novel provides a quasi-Legalist lens for decoding its narrative structure, character behaviors, and collective psychology — suggesting a profound literary engagement with the foundational questions of power, profit, and survival.

3. The Theoretical Reconstruction of Han Feizi's Legalism — The Philosophical Mechanisms of Li and Shu

Han Feizi's distinctive place in the history of Chinese thought lies not only in his systematic formulation of Legalist governance through *fa* (law), *shu* (tactics), and *shi* (power), but also in his audacious reevaluation of *li* (profit). In contrast to traditional moral discourses that condemned *li* as vulgar or corrupting, Han Feizi elevated it to a foundational principle of political and social operation. For him, *li* was not a symptom of ethical decay but the natural expression of human nature; not the adversary of morality, but the rational basis for institutional design. In this regard, Han Feizi represents the most forthright incorporation of Legalist consciousness into the blueprint of political philosophy. He does not trace the Confucian path from inner virtue to familial harmony and social order, but begins with a stark acknowledgment of human selfishness and constructs a system of governance grounded in the strategic management of that nature.

For Han Feizi, *li* is not limited to wealth or material gain; it refers to any psychological impulse capable of motivating human behavior. He argues that all human action stems from two fundamental drives: the pursuit of benefit and the avoidance of harm. Han Feizi states that all people are naturally inclined to seek benefit and avoid harm [1]. This disposition is innate and impervious to moral reeducation. Accordingly, Han Feizi grounds his political theory not in benevolence, love, or conscience, but in a system of interest-based

norms and control mechanisms. Rejecting Mencius's belief in the innate goodness of human nature and Confucian reliance on ritual and virtue, Han Feizi insists on "governing in accordance with human nature" — not by shaping character through moral cultivation, but by channeling behavior through structural constraints. People do not act virtuously out of love for the good; they act because "doing good is advantageous". They refrain from wrongdoing not from inner reverence, but because "doing evil incurs punishment".

From this premise, Han Feizi builds a triadic model of governance centered on *fa*, *shu*, and *shi*, designed to convert the unmanageable selfishness of human beings into a source of political energy. If *fa* represents the normative, codified side of governance, then *shu* constitutes the hidden tactics by which a ruler perceives, manipulates, and controls his subordinates. *Shu* does not oppose *fa* but rather compensates for its limitations. Han Feizi observes that *fa* consists of commands displayed in government offices and punishments that leave a lasting impression on the people, while *shu*, he explains, resides within the ruler's mind and is exercised through personal judgment [1]. In this schema, *fa* is public and external, *shu* private and internal; *fa* constrains the people, *shu* protects the ruler. The existence of *shu* acknowledges both the complexity of politics and the unpredictability of human conduct. Since people are not fully rational or transparent, law alone cannot govern all behavior — hence, the ruler must use *shu* to guide, probe, and discipline. *Shu* is not a moral category but a strategic calibration of human motivation.

This becomes most evident in Han Feizi's writings on political intrigue and power relations. In *The Inner Chapters*, he analyzes how even ostensibly altruistic professions — like medicine — are driven by *li*, noting that doctors "suck wounds and swallow blood" for profit. In *Eight Villains*, he dissects six types of treacherous ministers who manipulate appearances and exploit concealment to pursue private interests. In *The Forest of Persuasions*, Han Feizi famously warns that a ruler's ability to entertain doubt is essential for survival, while blind certainty leads to ruin — an assertion that rejects Confucian ideals of sincerity and trust in favor of strategic suspicion and controlled delegation [1,3]. Together, these passages present the image of a hyper-rational political engineer who eschews reliance on moral integrity and ensures, instead, that even self-interested actions align with the state's objectives. That is: compel people to "do good out of necessity".

Among the triad, *shi* — power or positional authority — is the most direct and indispensable. It denotes the capacity to command, enforce, and maintain authority. Han Feizi emphasizes that *fa* is meaningless without *shi*, and *shu* ineffective without control. As he declares in *Difficulty of Power*: "One who clutches law and occupies power governs; one who abandons law and relinquishes power descends into chaos". *Shi* is both the source of political legitimacy and the guarantor of compliance. Notably, Han Feizi treats *shi* in a strictly instrumental fashion: he does not concern himself with the origins or moral justification of authority, only with its operational utility. His thinking echoes the core premise of classical Legalism: "value lies in outcomes".

If *li* is the motor embedded in human nature, then *fa*, *shu*, and *shi* are the tools for institutionalizing, nationalizing, and governing that drive. In Han Feizi's framework, social order does not require moral consensus — it requires accurate calculations of benefit and harm. The goal of governance is not to elevate character but to ensure rule. A successful political system may not be just, but it is stable. People may not believe in the legitimacy of law, but they believe that violating it will be punished — and this deterrence alone secures compliance.

Yet, despite its coherence and practical appeal, Han Feizi's system harbors fatal contradictions, particularly in its over-reliance on the ruler's rationality and integrity, and the risk of transforming into an apparatus of legalized predation when the mechanisms fall into self-interested hands. First, it relies heavily on the rationality and integrity of the ruler, assuming that he is omniscient, incorruptible, and disinterested — qualities seldom realized in historical governance. Second, by raising *li* to the level of organizing principle, the model fails to install effective restraints on those who wield *fa*, *shu*, and *shi*. Once these mechanisms fall under the control of self-interested actors, the system risks transforming

into an apparatus of legalized predation. Though Han Feizi emphasizes the impartiality of law — "Law shows no favor to the noble; punishment recognizes no rank" — he provides little guidance for maintaining this impartiality in the face of entrenched inequality and elite manipulation.

This structural flaw is dramatized in *Jin Ping Mei*. Ximen Qing, as a local power broker who masters shu and commands shi while disregarding fa, becomes a living embodiment of Han Feizi's model in action. He excels in manipulation, secures institutional protection, and adheres closely to Legalist logic. Yet, he does not die due to institutional collapse, but from overindulgence — a poetic irony and a pointed critique. His death is not merely personal; it reveals the systemic instability of a model of governance based solely on tactics and power, stripped of ethical checks. In this light, *Jin Ping Mei* is more than a "low-resolution" experiment in Legalist realism — it is a literary pressure test of Legalist theory under real-world social conditions.

4. The Practice of Governance Through Tactics in *Jin Ping Mei*: The Exercise of Power from Ximen Qing to Qinghe County

Jin Ping Mei stands out in the history of Chinese literature not only for its intricate portrayal of late-Ming urban life, but also for the covert logic of power embedded beneath its narrative surface. This logic constitutes a system fundamentally distinct from traditional Confucian li zhi (rule by ritual): it is a pragmatic mechanism structured around shu (tactics) as the operative method, li (profit) as the distributive principle, and shi (power) as the structural guarantee. Within this configuration, morality is pushed to the margins, while tactical calculation emerges as the primary means of governance and survival. Ximen Qing, the novel's central figure, is neither a classic villain nor a Confucian sage-king; he is a pure "tactical governor", whose every move follows the logic of instrumental rationality. Through his rise and strategic operations, we witness a literary enactment of Legalist shu: how it begins with the individual and radiates outward into the wider structure of Qinghe society.

The essence of shu in Ximen Qing's power structure is most evident in his calculated deployment of resources and relationships [4]. He skillfully employs the tactic of winning loyalty through favors and inducing service through profit. Within his household, Wu Yueniang, the principal wife, holds symbolic status but lacks real economic authority. Li Ping'er gains favor through the wealth and assets she brings into the marriage, while Pan Jinlian ascends the internal hierarchy by manipulating Ximen Qing's desires with precision. Power and affection are not distributed based on ethical standing or ritual status, but through calculations of utility — Ximen "manages" his domestic sphere as if it were a miniature political system. Tactics that traditionally applied to ruler-minister relations are thus scaled down and transplanted into the domain of household governance, creating a private microcosm ruled by schemes, rewards, and surveillance [4].

This logic becomes fully articulated in Ximen's public dealings. He does not build public esteem through civic virtue or formal office, but extends his influence through a complex web of patronage and mutual interest. He bribes the powerful Cai Jing, employs Wu Dian'en to manipulate judicial proceedings, and forges alliances with figures like Ying Bojue through strategic reciprocity. This power network spans the realms of government, commerce, and local society, held together entirely by tactical maneuvering: some exchanges are explicit — money for protection; others implicit — favors for silence; still others masked — gifts disguised as courtesies. Han Feizi advises that a ruler should discern what people desire and use it to entice them, while also recognizing their fears and avoiding them — an approach vividly embodied in Ximen's interactions with characters such as Xie Xida, Ben Si, and Han Daoguo [1]. He knows how to satisfy others' desires at minimal cost, thereby ensuring their loyalty and utility.

Ximen's practice of shu-based governance initiates a wider transformation of Qinghe's social fabric. Nearly every character in his orbit, whether consciously or not, begins to operate within this tactical framework. Ying Bojue ceases to be a refined gentleman and becomes a social broker, trading connections for influence. Ben Si and Han Daoguo, once minor clerks, become entangled in bribery, speculation, and corruption. Even servants like Dai'an learn to read Ximen's moods and navigate shifting household hierarchies through opportunism and calculated flattery. These figures uphold no enduring values; their allegiance lies with the constant recalibration of interests. What emerges is a form of "grassroots Legalism", in which survival itself is a function of strategic adaptability.

The most striking example of this tactical order occurs within the legal system, as demonstrated by Chapter 47's account of the Miao Qing murder case. Ximen Qing, having accepted a substantial bribe, alters the legal record to exonerate the true murderer. There is no moral hesitation — only an impeccably executed sequence of profit-maximizing behavior. Ximen profits by distorting justice; Miao Qing survives by playing along; the censor Song turns a blind eye for political gain; the townsfolk remain silent out of self-preservation. Justice is not delivered through the law but mediated through tactical manipulation. Han Feizi's ideal of "law not bending to the noble, and punishment blind to rank" is here inverted into satire: the law becomes a servant of power, and punishment a tool for the politically astute. The system's legitimacy collapses, leaving only the shell of formal procedure disguising a deeply corrupted core.

Yet, as Han Feizi's own logic suggests, a society governed purely by shu must eventually confront the moral vacuum at the heart of the strategist. *Jin Ping Mei* explores this reality with narrative subtlety. In his later years, Ximen Qing succumbs to indulgence and vanity. His mastery of tactics fades, his control of shi weakens, and the carefully maintained "human harmony" of his household disintegrates. He is no longer a disciplined political merchant, but a man consumed by pleasure and ego. His domestic authority falters — Pan Jinlian plots in secret, Li Ping'er withdraws emotionally, and Wu Yueniang asserts new independence. His public alliances collapse — Cai Jing falls from favor, Song Qiao is reassigned, and his protective web disbands. He does not die due to a political miscalculation, but as a result of indulgence in his desires — an end that, though personal, underscores a deeper institutional fragility. The issue lies not just in a tactical failure, but in the system's dependence on the continued foresight, discipline, and authority of a single individual. In a regime held together by calculation alone, even minor cracks in character can bring down the entire structure.

In this sense, *Jin Ping Mei* offers a holographic image of a "tactical society": a vision of how governance, relationships, and institutions all operate under the reign of calculation. Ximen Qing is not so much a "man without virtue" as a "man of precision"; not a traitor to morality, but the inevitable byproduct of institutional hollowing. In him, we see a secular realization of Han Feizi's model — not governed by a rational monarch, but by local strongmen wielding tactics for personal gain. This "miniaturized Legalism" confirms the practical applicability of Legalist logic, while also exposing its fatal flaw: the total absence of ethical safeguards.

Here, shu is not merely a tactic — it becomes a placeholder where values once resided. It offers structure but no meaning. Ximen Qing's clever manipulations may provoke admiration, but never reverence. Qinghe's tactical order may function efficiently, but it yields no sense of peace. Beneath the machinery of schemes lies a shared understanding that the system is fundamentally untrustworthy — everyone survives by plotting, and everyone waits for the right moment to betray.

5. The Self-Dissolution of Legalist Order and Literary Reflection

The critical force of *Jin Ping Mei* lies not in its presentation of a high-efficiency governance model, but in its calm yet emotionally resonant exposure of how a social order grounded solely in Legalist logic inevitably collapses from within. This collapse is not

precipitated by external shocks, but by internal corruption embedded in the very machinery of operation. Han Feizi's governance model, constructed around the triad of fa (law), shu (tactics), and shi (power), undergoes in *Jin Ping Mei* what might be called a "low-dimensional experiment". Rather than producing durable order, the system steadily unravels. The novel thus becomes a literary critique of Legalism, revealing the danger of preserving social structure without ethical substance — a system in which the form of order survives while its meaning decays.

The abrupt death of Ximen Qing signals the implosion of the entire profit-driven network he sustained. As the central node in Qinghe's social matrix, his presence held together a complex structure of relationships organized around li (profit). He was not only the distributor of resources and mediator of power, but also the author and guarantor of the tactical order itself. Its effectiveness was never institutionally guaranteed — it relied entirely on his intelligence, energy, and social dexterity. With his disappearance, the structure collapses like a vertebra snapping from within. From the moment Ximen "dies in a pool of blood and semen", the narrative shifts from the exuberance of accumulation to the encroaching void of disintegration. His death marks not only the downfall of an individual but the dissolution of an entire logic of governance. The novel appoints no successor to inherit his empire; instead, it depicts Wu Yueniang, Pan Jinlian, Ben Si, Han Daoguo, and Ying Bojue each going their separate ways, the system disbanding and dispersing. The proverb "when the tree falls, the monkeys scatter" here signifies not personal betrayal but the fragility of a social structure built around personalized power [5].

This collapse also dramatizes a core paradox in Han Feizi's Legalist theory: if human relationships are reduced to the calculus of benefit, and all social bonds grounded in interest, then stable order requires impersonal institutions and neutral authority. Yet in *Jin Ping Mei*, institutions are fully privatized, and authority is maintained through charisma and informal management. Once the "tactical subject" collapses, the institutional shell proves hollow. Han Daoguo absconds with funds; Ying Bojue defects to new patrons; Wang Luer liquidates household assets to form new alliances. Even the household servants, such as Lai Wang'er and Dai'an, pursue independent paths. These are not betrayals in the moral sense — they are rational moves within a logic governed by li. As Han Feizi wrote: "The relation between ruler and subject is calculation; the bond between father and son is interest". When profit is no longer assured, loyalty, sentiment, and institutional legitimacy unravel instantly.

What is perhaps most ironic is the novel's brief recourse to religion in an attempt to patch the ethical vacuum — yet even this turn is drawn into the logic of utility. After Ximen's death, Wu Yueniang donates incense money, distributes funerary alms, and hosts elaborate rituals that outwardly appear pious but are primarily meant to secure social legitimacy and preserve family dignity. Likewise, Xiao Ge's decision to become a monk is not a renunciation of worldly desire, but a passive retreat prompted by failed inheritance and social displacement. Religion, far from serving as a transcendent moral anchor, is depicted as an emotional coping mechanism and reputational strategy. The Buddhist and Daoist imagery in the novel does not signal spiritual elevation; instead, it highlights the ritualization and instrumentalization of belief, leaving readers to question whether ethical values can ever be authentically restored [6].

If Ximen Qing's tactical empire represents the concrete realization of Han Feizi's theory, then its demise exposes the impossibility of sustaining a world ruled by li alone. Han Feizi's ideal sovereign is a dispassionate strategist — free from desire, partiality, and weakness — who administers society with cold precision. *Jin Ping Mei* reveals that such a sovereign exists only in theory. The real tactical actor is entangled in appetites, ambitions, and interpersonal webs. When li becomes the sole engine of action, no amount of shu or shi can stabilize the structure. The novel does not announce this failure explicitly, but the narrative progression draws the reader step by step toward an inevitable unraveling.

In this light, *Jin Ping Mei* is not a simple denunciation of Legalism, but a profound internal critique. It recognizes the broad explanatory power of *li* in describing human behavior, but shows that when an entire society operates according to this principle, outward order becomes hollow and unstable. When ethical norms can no longer guide action, individuals turn to tactic and control; but when these tactics begin to fail, disintegration follows. The brilliance of *Jin Ping Mei* lies not in offering solutions, but in resisting simplistic ones. It neither idealizes traditional morality nor romanticizes tactical mastery. Instead, it raises a deeper question: when ethics collapse, institutions break down, and affective ties become unreliable, what modes of coexistence remain imaginable?

In this sense, the novel's ultimate vision is both a searing critique of Legalism and a quiet philosophical inquiry. In today's world, where technocratic reason increasingly supplants humanistic reflection, and algorithmic governance masquerades as "rational order", *Jin Ping Mei* retains a haunting relevance. When management, metrics, and market logic govern every sphere — when *li* is repackaged as "freedom of choice" — do our moral resources, institutional resilience, and collective imagination suffice to resist the coldness and fragmentation that follow? Are we, perhaps, reliving the story of Qinghe — perfecting our instruments of control while forgetting why trust matters, why sacrifice is necessary, and why shared meaning must not be lost?

Perhaps the novel's deepest insight is not a condemnation of desire, but a lament for how the relentless pursuit of profit and calculation leads to the erosion of meaning [7]. A society that exalts *li* as its supreme value suffers not from greed, but from loneliness — not from sudden collapse, but from a gradual erosion of conviction. In this feast of interests, everyone gains what they want, yet no one finds where they belong. This is the novel's ultimate tragedy — and the source of its enduring literary power.

6. Conclusion: Gazing into the Fracture of Order Beneath the Shadow of Li

Jin Ping Mei is a novel about *li* — about profit — but also about the disintegration of order. With an unflinching gaze, it portrays a world devoid of moral redemption, heroic subjects, or luminous futures. Every twist of fate, every rise and fall, is embedded within a web of interest and calculation. If Han Feizi offered a blueprint for governance grounded in the logic of *li*, *Jin Ping Mei* strips away its abstract form and reimagines it through the dust, desire, and decay of everyday life — producing, in literary terms, a full-scale simulation and unraveling of a Legalist regime.

Yet the novel's critique does not announce itself through manifestos or slogans. Instead, it resides in compositional decisions, in the restraint of narrative voice, and in the patient unwinding of structure. It neither praises Confucianism nor endorses Legalism. Rather, it lingers in the void between the two — allowing characters to speak for themselves, systems to collapse without commentary, and order to dissolve without dramatization. This form of silent critique, this refusal to offer moral closure or didactic consolation, marks *Jin Ping Mei's* literary modernity. It does not proclaim truth, but stages a crisis that the reader must inhabit.

The value of *Jin Ping Mei* today may not lie in reaffirming ancient moralities or condemning rational calculation. Rather, it serves as a persistent reminder that systems cannot be judged by efficiency alone, and that the meaning of life cannot be surrendered to mechanisms of control and optimization. When a society loses its capacity to imagine why life is worth living, why mutual respect matters, and why sacrifice is necessary, then no amount of *shu*, however refined; no body of *fa*, however comprehensive; and no structure of *shi*, however formidable, can compensate for the hollowing at its core. What remains is a machine — complex yet cold, ordered yet desolate.

In the shadow of *li*, *Jin Ping Mei* reveals not merely the downfall of a man or the decay of a city, but the existential fracture — the profound internal rupture — that emerges when society clings to structure while abandoning meaning. The novel offers no answers — only

questions. It grants no closure — only provocation. And therein lies its enduring power: to unsettle, to illuminate, and to speak beyond its own time.

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