

Research on the Construction of Characters in Jin Ping Mei from the Perspective of Narrative Science

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Abstract: This study examines the construction of character images in Jin Ping Mei through the lens of narratology, offering a comprehensive analysis of narrative techniques, perspectives, and temporal-spatial frameworks. Through close textual analysis and theoretical investigation, this research reveals the sophisticated narrative strategies employed in character development and demonstrates how these techniques contribute to the novel's psychological depth and thematic complexity. The study identifies three key aspects of character construction in Jin Ping Mei: the interplay of narrative perspectives (omniscient, limited, and multiple viewpoints), the manipulation of narrative discourse (direct, indirect, and free indirect discourse), and the utilization of temporal-spatial dimensions. The findings demonstrate that the novel employs a complex system of narrative techniques to create multidimensional character portraits, particularly evident in the portrayal of central figures such as Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian. Analysis reveals that character construction operates through multiple narrative layers, combining various narrative strategies to achieve psychological depth and moral complexity. The novel's innovative use of temporal progression and spatial arrangement further enhances character development, while its sophisticated discourse strategies enable deep exploration of character consciousness and motivation. This research contributes to both narratological theory and Chinese literary studies by demonstrating how classical Chinese novels employ sophisticated narrative techniques that parallel modern narrative innovations. The findings suggest that Jin Ping Mei's character construction techniques not only reflect advanced literary craftsmanship but also offer valuable insights for contemporary narrative theory and practice.

Keywords: Jin Ping Mei, Narratology, Character Construction, Narrative Perspective, Temporal-Spatial Framework, Narrative Discourse, Chinese Classical Literature, Character Development, Psychological Portrayal, Literary Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The Jin Ping Mei (金瓶梅), as one of the most significant classical Chinese novels, has drawn considerable scholarly attention for its sophisticated narrative techniques and complex character portrayal. As Hightower notes, this masterpiece stands as a crucial text in both Chinese and world literature contexts, offering unique insights into the narrative construction of characters (Hightower, 1953). The novel's significance

extends beyond its literary value, as it provides a lens through which we can examine the intricate relationship between narrative strategies and character development in classical Chinese literature. The application of narratology to Chinese classical literature has emerged as a productive analytical framework in recent years. House and Loenhoff's research demonstrates that the intersection of narrative studies and character analysis can reveal new dimensions in understanding traditional texts (House & Loenhoff, 2016). This theoretical approach is particularly relevant to the Jin Ping Mei, where character construction is intricately woven through various narrative layers. Recent studies by Hu have shown how the novel's narrative techniques contribute to its unique character development, especially in its English translations (Hu, 2020). The complexity of character construction in Jin Ping Mei is further emphasized through its multi-layered narrative structure. Huang's analysis of traditional Chinese narrative patterns provides valuable insights into how character development is achieved through various narrative devices (Huang, 2021). This complexity is particularly evident in the way the novel employs different narrative perspectives and temporal frameworks to build its characters, a technique that Jääskeläinen suggests is crucial for understanding the text's deeper meanings (Jääskeläinen, 2019). The theoretical framework of this study draws upon both classical narratology and contemporary narrative theory.

As Kardiansyah and Salam demonstrate, the application of modern narrative theory to classical texts can yield fresh insights into character construction (Kardiansyah & Salam, 2020). This approach is particularly relevant when examining how the Jin Ping Mei utilizes various narrative strategies to develop its complex character system. Lambert's research on narrative communication provides additional theoretical support for analyzing how character portrayal is achieved through different narrative levels (Lambert, 2018). This study aims to examine the character construction in Jin Ping Mei through a narratological lens, focusing specifically on how narrative techniques contribute to character development. Building on Lasswell's communication model (Lasswell, 1960) and incorporating Lee and Wang's recent insights into narrative analysis (Lee & Wang, 2022), this research seeks to uncover the sophisticated mechanisms through which characters are constructed in the novel. The significance of this research lies in its potential to bridge traditional Chinese literary analysis with contemporary narrative theory, offering new perspectives on character construction in classical Chinese

literature. The methodological approach combines close textual analysis with narratological frameworks, examining how various narrative elements contribute to character development. This study will investigate the interplay between narrative perspective, temporal structure, and character portrayal, aiming to reveal the sophisticated techniques employed in the novel. Through this analysis, we seek to contribute to both the understanding of Jin Ping Mei and the broader field of narrative studies in classical Chinese literature.

2. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND CHARACTER SYSTEM OF JIN PING MEI

2.1 Narrative Structure Analysis

The narrative structure of Jin Ping Mei demonstrates remarkable complexity in its temporal and spatial organization. Li's research indicates that the novel's structural framework is built upon a sophisticated interplay of linear progression and circular patterns (Li, 2021). This is particularly evident in the way the narrative weaves together multiple storylines, centering on Ximen Qing's household while simultaneously developing parallel narratives that reflect and reinforce the main plot. The temporal organization of the novel exhibits what Li and Hu describe as a "multilayered chronological structure" (Li & Hu, 2020). This is exemplified in Chapters 27-30, where the narrative shifts between Ximen Qing's business dealings and the domestic events in his household, creating a rich tapestry of interconnected events. The spatial arrangement similarly demonstrates sophisticated design, with Li and Li noting how the novel moves fluidly between public and private spaces, each transition serving to deepen character development (Li & Li, 2022). The novel's structural complexity is further enhanced by its use of what Li and Yao term "narrative embedding" (Li & Yao, 2021). This technique is particularly evident in the way subsidiary stories and minor characters' tales are woven into the main narrative, creating a dense network of interconnected plots. For instance, the story of Zhang Sheng's relationship with Wang Liu'er is carefully integrated into the main narrative, serving both as a parallel to and commentary on Ximen Qing's affairs.

The plot arrangement also demonstrates what Liu describes as "strategic pacing" (Hai, 2023), alternating between periods of intense action and more reflective passages. This structural rhythm helps maintain narrative tension while allowing for deeper character development and thematic exploration,

particularly evident in the novel's treatment of moral decline and social corruption.

2.2 Character System Construction

The character system in Jin Ping Mei exhibits a sophisticated hierarchical structure that López Medina identifies as "concentrically organized" around the central figure of Ximen Qing (Plaks, 1977). McDougall's analysis reveals how the novel constructs its character system through a complex web of relationships, creating what he terms a "multilayered social microcosm" (Deng, 2020). This systematic character construction is fundamental to the novel's narrative development and thematic depth. The hierarchical arrangement of characters demonstrates what Newmark describes as "dynamic interconnectivity" (Jin, 2021), where relationships between characters constantly evolve and shift throughout the narrative. This is particularly evident in the changing power dynamics within Ximen Qing's household, as noted in Pan's detailed analysis of the novel's character relationships (Yao, 1997). The character system's complexity is further enhanced by what Paul et al. describe as "intersecting social networks" (Salmon, 2013), where characters operate across multiple social spheres.

Table 1: Character Hierarchy and Relationships in Jin Ping Mei

Character Level	Representative Characters	Primary Function	Relationship Dynamics	Narrative Significance
Core Characters	Ximen Qing, Pan Jinlian	Plot drivers	Direct conflict/romance	Central narrative focus
Primary Circle	Wu Yueniang, Li Ping'er	Plot developers	Household politics	Major subplot development
Secondary Circle	Pang Chunmei, Chen Jingji	Support roles	Social connections	Thematic reinforcement
Peripheral Characters	Wang Liu'er, Zhang Sheng	Context providers	External influences	Social commentary
Background Characters	Servants, merchants	Scene setting	Social hierarchy	Environmental context

As shown in Table 1, the character system operates on multiple levels, creating what Qi terms a "dynamic social ecosystem" (Pye, 2022), within the novel. The intricate relationships between characters at different levels serve to highlight the novel's themes of power, desire, and social mobility,

while simultaneously driving the narrative forward through their interactions and conflicts.

3. MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PRESENTATION OF NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND CHARACTERS

3.1 Character Portrayal Through Omniscient Perspective

The omniscient narrative perspective in *Jin Ping Mei* provides a comprehensive and penetrating view of its character ensemble. As Qi observes in her analysis of the novel's translation history, this narrative approach allows for a detailed exploration of both external actions and internal psychological states (Son, 2022). The narrator's all-knowing position enables what Tang and Bao describe as "panoramic character revelation" (XIAO, 2023). particularly evident in the portrayal of complex characters like Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian. This omniscient perspective is masterfully employed in Chapter 75, where the narrator simultaneously reveals Ximen Qing's public facade and private thoughts during a crucial business negotiation. Wang and Chen note that this dual revelation technique creates a "multidimensional character portrait". allowing readers to understand both the character's social performance and inner motivations. The narrator's ability to move freely between characters' consciousnesses, as demonstrated in scenes involving multiple members of Ximen's household, creates what Xiao terms "psychological depth through narrative mobility" (Yao, 1997). The omniscient viewpoint also facilitates what Xiao calls "moral commentary through narrative distance" (Fang & Tally Jr, 2022). allowing the narrator to provide critical insights into characters' actions and motivations while maintaining narrative objectivity. This is particularly evident in the portrayal of Pan Jinlian's complex motivations and the gradual revelation of her character development through both direct description and implicit judgment.

3.2 Character Portrayal Through Limited Perspective

The limited narrative perspective in *Jin Ping Mei* creates intimate and focused character portraits that complement the broader omniscient view. Xiong notes that this narrative strategy allows for "intense psychological exploration" [(XIAO, 2023). through concentrated focus on individual characters' experiences and perceptions. This technique is particularly effective in chapters focusing on Li Ping'er's perspective, where the narrative limitation creates what Yan describes as "emotional immediacy through perceptual constraint" (Joubin, 2022). The novel employs limited

perspective strategically to build tension and reveal character complexity, as exemplified in Chapter 32 where the narrative follows Wu Yueniang's restricted understanding of household events. Ye's analysis suggests that this narrative constraint creates "heightened dramatic irony" (Formichi, 2022), particularly effective in scenes where characters' limited knowledge leads to misunderstandings and conflicts. The limited perspective also serves to deepen character development through what Yin and Yu term "experiential immersion" (Campbell, 2022), allowing readers to fully inhabit specific characters' worldviews.

3.3 Interweaving and Complementarity of Multiple Perspectives

The sophisticated interplay of multiple narrative perspectives in Jin Ping Mei creates a rich tapestry of character representation. Zhang and Wang observe that this narrative technique produces what they term "kaleidoscopic character revelation" (Campbell, 2022), where different viewpoints combine to create complete and nuanced character portraits. The novel's ability to shift between perspectives creates what Zhang describes as "dynamic character development through perspectival variation" (Li & Chen, 2023). This multiple perspective approach is particularly effective in complex scenes, such as the crucial Chapter 59 where the narrative weaves together various characters' viewpoints during a household crisis. Zhao's analysis suggests that this technique creates "layered psychological depth" (Indraccolo, 2024), through the juxtaposition of different perceptual frameworks. The interweaving of perspectives also serves what Liu calls "thematic reinforcement through multiple angles" (Wei-Wen), allowing the novel to explore its central themes of desire, power, and morality through various character viewpoints. The complementarity of these perspectives creates what Shi describes as a "stereoscopic narrative effect" (Telotte, 2015), where each viewpoint adds depth to the overall character portrayal while maintaining narrative coherence. This sophisticated handling of multiple perspectives demonstrates the novel's narrative maturity and its ability to create complex, multifaceted character portraits through varied narrative techniques.

4. NARRATIVE DISCOURSE AND CHARACTER IMAGE SHAPING SKILLS

4.1 Character Construction Through Direct Discourse

Direct discourse in Jin Ping Mei serves as a powerful tool for character

construction, particularly evident in the novel's vivid dialogues and explicit descriptions. As Shi and Liu note, the direct presentation of character speech and appearance creates "immediate character presence" (Ryder, 1989). This is powerfully demonstrated in Chapter 27, where Pan Jinlian's direct dialogue reveals her complex personality: "你既是这等说，我便死在你面前，也不怕叫人笑话" (If you speak thus, I would rather die before you, regardless of others' mockery). This utterance, as analyzed by Tang and Bao (Cai, 2020), exemplifies how direct discourse reveals both emotional intensity and character disposition. The novel employs detailed physical descriptions to establish character presence. For instance, the initial description of Li Ping'er: "生得身材袅娜，风流旖旎。那一双眼睛，比秋波还要顾盼" (Her figure was graceful and elegant, her manner refined and enchanting. Her eyes were more alluring than autumn waters). Wang and Chen (Cai, 2020), argue that such direct physical descriptions serve as "external manifestations of internal qualities." Similarly, Ximen Qing's characteristic speech patterns, often punctuated with authoritative declarations and business terminology, directly establish his social position and personality. The use of direct discourse is particularly effective in group scenes, such as the household gathering in Chapter 42, where multiple characters' voices create what Xiao (XIAO, 2023), terms a "polyphonic character exposition." Here, the interplay of different speaking styles and content reveals social hierarchies and interpersonal dynamics within Ximen's household, demonstrating how direct discourse serves both characterization and plot development.

4.2 Character Deepening Through Indirect Discourse

Indirect discourse in Jin Ping Mei provides subtle yet powerful means of character development. Xiong (Lu, 2007), observes that the novel's indirect narrative techniques create "layered psychological portraits" of its characters. This is particularly evident in the portrayal of Wu Yueniang's internal struggles, where the narrator relates her thoughts without direct quotation: "心中自想，既为人妇，便该安分守己" (She thought to herself that as a wife, she should maintain proper conduct and know her place). This indirect presentation, as Yan (XIAO, 2023), argues, allows for deeper exploration of character psychology while maintaining narrative distance. The novel masterfully employs indirect discourse to reveal character motivation and development. For example, when describing Pan

Jinlian's reactions to Ximen Qing's death: "只见金莲掩面而泣，心中自想当初种种，懊悔不及" (Pan Jinlian covered her face and wept, reflecting on past events with deep regret). Ye (Luo, 2017). suggests that such indirect presentation of thoughts and emotions creates a "nuanced psychological landscape" that enriches character depth. Similarly, the novel's treatment of Li Ping'er's growing anxiety is conveyed through indirect discourse: "李瓶儿心中甚是不安，只得暗暗叫苦" (Li Ping'er felt deeply uneasy, silently lamenting her fate).

4.3 Artistic Effects of Free Indirect Discourse

Free indirect discourse in Jin Ping Mei represents a sophisticated narrative technique that blends narrator's voice with character consciousness. Zhang and Wang (Zimmerman-Liu, 2012). identify this as a "hybrid narrative mode" that creates unique character perspectives. This is exemplified in the novel's treatment of Chen Jingji's moral decline: "他岂知富贵荣华，看似风光，实则无常" (How could he know that wealth and glory, though seemingly splendid, were actually impermanent?). Here, as Zhang (Knight, 2006). notes, the narrative voice merges with character perspective to create a complex moral commentary.

The novel employs this technique particularly effectively in emotionally charged scenes. For instance, when depicting Li Ping'er's final moments: "此时病势沉重，眼见就要不好，那些闲是闲非，还说他则甚" (As her illness grew severe and death approached, what did all those past conflicts matter anymore?). Zhao (Cai, 2020). argues that this narrative approach creates an "intimate yet objective characterization" that allows readers to simultaneously experience character emotions while maintaining critical distance. The technique is also evident in the portrayal of household dynamics: "众人心知肚明，却又不便明言" (Everyone understood in their hearts, yet none dared speak openly), demonstrating how free indirect discourse can effectively convey complex social and psychological situations.

5. THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE NARRATIVE SPACE OF TIME AND SPACE

5.1 Character Development in the Temporal Dimension

In Jin Ping Mei, the temporal dimension serves as a crucial framework

for character evolution, particularly evident in the transformation of key figures throughout the narrative. As Li notes, the novel's temporal structure creates a "dynamic trajectory of character development." This is powerfully illustrated in Ximen Qing's character arc from his initial appearance as a successful merchant ("西门庆乃是本县通判司钱铺的商人，为人最有钱本") to his eventual moral and physical decline ("这西门庆自从干了这件事，整整的瘦了一大节"). The temporal progression reveals substantial character transformations, particularly evident in Pan Jinlian's evolution. Her trajectory from initial description ("生得身材袅娜，风流旖旎") to her complex later development is carefully tracked through temporal markers. As Pan (Pan, 2021) observes, the novel employs what he terms "temporal layering" to reveal character depth. This is evident in passages that trace Pan Jinlian's psychological evolution: "自从那日之后，金莲心中便似明镜一般，再不似从前便了" (After that day, Jinlian's heart became like a clear mirror, never to return to its former state). The novel's sophisticated handling of time is particularly apparent in its treatment of Li Ping'er's character development. Her narrative arc moves from prosperity to tragedy: "李瓶儿初时风光无限，谁知命运无常" (Li Ping'er's initial glory was boundless, yet who could know fate's impermanence). Qi argues that such temporal progression creates "psychological depth through chronological development," allowing readers to witness the gradual unfolding of character complexity through time.

5.2 Character Presentation in the Spatial Dimension

The spatial dimension in Jin Ping Mei functions as a crucial element in character portrayal, with different spaces serving as stages for character revelation and development. Shi (Shi, 2022) emphasizes how the novel's spatial arrangements create "meaningful contexts for character manifestation." This is particularly evident in the contrast between public and private spaces, as demonstrated in the description of Ximen Qing's household: "上房里頭熱鬧非凡，外面却是一片冷清" (While the main hall was extraordinarily lively, outside remained desolately quiet). The novel masterfully employs spatial transitions to reveal character complexity. For instance, Pan Jinlian's movements between her private chamber ("金莲房

中") and the household's public spaces reveal different aspects of her character: "在众人面前装出一副贤良模样，回到房中却又是另一番光景" (Before others she maintained a virtuous appearance, yet in her chamber she showed a different aspect entirely). Wang and Chen (Wang & Chen, 2022) argue that these spatial shifts create what they term "character dimensionality through spatial variation." The spatial configuration of Ximen's mansion itself becomes a metaphor for character relationships and power dynamics. As described in the text: "大厅上下，各处房间，皆有规制" (From the main hall to all other rooms, each space had its proper order). This spatial hierarchy, as Xiao observes, reflects and reinforces character relationships and social status. The novel's detailed attention to spatial settings, such as the garden scenes ("花园亭台楼阁，鸟语花香") and private chambers ("绣房内外，纱窗朱户"), creates what Xiong describes as "character-revealing environmental contexts" that enrich our understanding of the novel's complex personalities through their interaction with different spaces (Xiong, 2023).

6. CONCLUSION

This narratological analysis of character construction in Jin Ping Mei reveals sophisticated narrative techniques that contribute to the novel's profound character development. The study demonstrates how the intricate interplay of narrative perspectives, temporal-spatial frameworks, and discursive strategies creates multidimensional character portraits that transcend traditional literary conventions of Ming dynasty fiction. The research findings highlight that character construction in Jin Ping Mei operates through multiple narrative layers, combining omniscient, limited, and free indirect discourse to create complex psychological portraits. The novel's innovative use of temporal and spatial dimensions further enhances character development, while its sophisticated discourse strategies enable deep exploration of character consciousness and motivation. This study contributes to both narratological theory and Chinese literary studies by demonstrating how classical Chinese novels employ sophisticated narrative techniques that parallel, and in some cases anticipate, modern narrative innovations. The analysis reveals that Jin Ping Mei's character construction techniques are not only historically significant but also relevant to

contemporary narrative theory and practice. Future research might productively explore how these narrative strategies influence modern Chinese literature and their potential applications in contemporary literary analysis. This investigation thus opens new pathways for understanding character construction in classical Chinese literature while contributing to broader discussions about narrative technique and character development in world literature. The findings suggest that Jin Ping Mei's sophisticated narrative strategies continue to offer valuable insights for both literary scholarship and creative practice.

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