

SCHOLARS-MERCHANTS CULTURE
AND SOCIAL MORALITY IN
ER PAI

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ER PAI

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to identify the cause and influence of the scholars-merchants culture in the late Ming Dynasty, the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty, and the scholars-merchants culture and the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty presented in *Er Pai*. The methodology applied in this research are Textual Analysis, Discourse Analysis, and the Historical Method to reveal the intersection between scholars-merchants integration and the development of socio-cultural history in the novel. This study found that the positioning of the social morality like public and private, righteousness and profit, as well as benevolence and destiny in the late Ming Dynasty and the relationship between the scholars-merchants culture and social morality in the late Ming Dynasty. During the late Ming Dynasty, the societal perspective regarding the concept of public and private emphasized meeting the reasonable criteria of private within the framework of conforming to the public. Righteousness and profit were not viewed as contradictory during the late Ming Dynasty. Profit-seeking behaviour was considered acceptable as long as it aligned with temperate, rational, and legal standards, consistent with the principles of righteousness. Benevolence symbolized the display of an individual's moral cultivation, while the perspective of destiny incorporated the influence of one's actions on personal fate. Destiny was influenced by both predetermined circumstances and human actions, ultimately determining outcomes. The research result showed that the formation of the scholars-merchants culture led to the blending of each other's cultures, they made different choices about the implementation of social morality. The implication of this study is to highlight about the impact of the new culture formed by scholars and merchants on social morality in the late Ming Dynasty, and the new positioning of social moral values in the late Ming Dynasty in promoting the culture of scholars and merchants.

SCHOLARS-MERCHANTS CULTURE AND SOCIAL MORALITY IN *ER PAI*

ABSTRAK

Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti punca dan pengaruh budaya sarjana dan pedagang pada zaman Dinasti Ming lewat, moral sosial zaman Dinasti Ming, dan budaya sarjana-pedagang dan moral sosial zaman Dinasti Ming yang dibentangkan dalam *Er Pai*. Metodologi yang digunakan dalam penyelidikan ini ialah Analisis Tekstual, Analisis Wacana dan Kaedah Penyelidikan Sejarah untuk mendedahkan persimpangan antara integrasi sarjana-pedagang dan perkembangan sejarah sosiobudaya dalam novel. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa kedudukan moral sosial seperti awam dan persendirian, rasional dan keuntungan, serta kemanusiaan dan takdir pada zaman Dinasti Ming lewat dan hubungan antara budaya sarjana-pedagang dan moral sosial pada zaman Dinasti Ming lewat. Pada Dinasti Ming lewat, perspektif masyarakat mengenai konsep awam dan swasta menekankan memenuhi kriteria munasabah swasta dalam rangka akur kepada orang ramai. Mengejar keuntungan yang sah dan pembebasan keinginan peribadi boleh diterima dalam masyarakat. Rasional dan keuntungan tidak dilihat sebagai bertentangan semasa Dinasti Ming lewat. Tingkah laku mencari keuntungan dianggap boleh diterima selagi ia sejajar dengan piawai sederhana, rasional dan undang-undang, selaras dengan prinsip kesolehan. Kemanusiaan melambangkan paparan penanaman moral individu, manakala perspektif takdir menggabungkan pengaruh tindakan seseorang terhadap nasib peribadi. Takdir dipengaruhi oleh kedua-dua keadaan yang telah ditetapkan dan tindakan manusia, akhirnya menentukan hasil. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pembentukan budaya sarjana-pedagang membawa kepada percampuran budaya masing-masing, mereka membuat pilihan yang berbeza tentang pelaksanaan moral sosial. Implikasi kajian ini adalah untuk mengetengahkan tentang kesan budaya baharu yang dibentuk oleh sarjana dan pedagang terhadap moral sosial pada zaman Dinasti Ming lewat, dan kedudukan baharu nilai moral sosial pada Dinasti Ming lewat dalam mempromosikan budaya sarjana dan pedagang.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The Ming Dynasty, as documented in historical records, witnessed significant societal transformations and cultural shifts, primarily attributed to the Chenghua (成化) and Hongzhi (弘治) periods, marking the genesis of these shifts in Ming Dynasty's social and cultural fabric (Chen, 2018). The era of Zhengde (正德) further accelerated this transformative phase (Lin, 2001). Social customs, serving as a direct reflection of these changes, were notably deemed pivotal by chroniclers and writers during the Ming Dynasty, underlining the significance of the evolving societal norms (Chen, 2018).

From the mid-Ming Dynasty onward, conventional paradigms gradually shed their antiquated frameworks. The term "life" began to encompass not only agricultural and textile pursuits but also extended to encompass commercial endeavors. Commercial operations were viewed as a means of both livelihood and a path to prosperity during the Ming Dynasty. This evolution led to the coining of the term "business" within the narrative of the novels (Chen, 2004). This progression highlighted the Ming Dynasty populace's receptiveness to reimagining traditional concepts, not only fostering rapid advancements in commerce but also broadening the horizons of "life governance". It encouraged individuals to enhance their economic circumstances within the legal frameworks of governance.

The social and cultural metamorphoses during the Ming Dynasty marked a significant epoch in Chinese history. Influenced by imperial examinations, commerce, politics, ideology, and various other factors, Ming Dynasty society was propelled to challenge traditional concepts and values. This was a conscious effort to break free from ethical constraints and articulate human nature and desires. The burgeoning of human desires showcased the evolving thoughts and culture, amplifying the phenomenon of the scholars-merchants culture's development and the concurrent transformation of social morality. Shen Yao (沈垚), in the Qing Dynasty, eloquently encapsulated this sentiment in the *Preface to Mr. Fei Xishan's 70th couple birthday* 《费席山先生七十双寿序》:

Emperor Song Taizu consolidated worldly advantages under the purview of officials, necessitating scholar-bureaucrats to engage in farming and sericulture to sustain

their families. This marked a departure from ancient norms, where officials weren't entangled in profit pursuits. The shift led to officials vying with common people for economic gains. Those without a farming or sericulture profession had to dedicate themselves tirelessly, emphasizing specialization and enterprise. Consequently, the imperative to engage in breeding escalated, fortifying the ascendancy of the merchant class. If one's father or elder brother did not establish a successful career, the children lacked incentives for scholarly pursuits. The traditional division of four distinct groups in ancient times had blurred, with later generations witnessing a convergence. The progeny of ancient scholars invariably pursued scholarly paths, whereas the offspring of subsequent merchants could ascend to scholarly roles. The transformations since the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties diverged markedly. During this period, a substantial number of scholars hailed from merchant backgrounds, and the thinning of distinctions grew more pronounced. Notably, the prevailing societal focus shifted toward commerce, drawing many brilliant minds to the merchant vocation. The merchant's occupation, embodying brilliance and sagacity, allowed a unique understanding of the world and the ability to undertake endeavors others could not. Scholars, in contrast, experienced a transition towards avarice, while merchants adopted an ethos of dignified ancient camaraderie. This dichotomy succinctly encapsulates the evolving worldly customs of the era.

(Shen; cited in Yu, 1996, p. 97-98)

The aforementioned statement elucidates the social standing of merchants in the period following the Song and Yuan Dynasties, shedding light on the alteration in the economic underpinnings of the imperial examination system during that epoch. After the Song Dynasty, merchant families undertook the cultivation of scholars, resulting in a

perceptible blurring of the distinctions and delineations between scholars and merchants. Concurrently, Chinese society began placing increasing value on commercial pursuits. Individuals possessing the capacity to derive profit from business ventures, particularly the affluent merchant class, gradually assumed roles previously held by scholar-bureaucrats in social welfare enterprises. During this period, the ethos of "relying on business for a living" (以贾为生) became ingrained in the mindset of scholars, coexisting with the notion that individuals should independently manage their livelihoods prior to engaging in scholarly pursuits, and should not remain "dependent on others" (待养于人). This principle retained its significance irrespective of economic circumstances (Yu, 1996). Scholars asserted that human desires (人欲) should align with the principle of natural order (天理), affirming the doctrine of governing life (治生论). However, the cultural interplay between scholars and merchants, as well as the dynamics of their relationship, significantly influenced social ideology and morality.

The trajectory of development for both scholars and merchants encompassed the evolution of refined and coarse cultures (雅俗文化), which intertwined intricately. Scholars were amenable to financial negotiations with merchants to achieve their aspirations, while merchants aspired to attain scholarly status through artistic pursuits. The lofty ideals of scholars and the profit-driven motives of merchants were interlinked, creating complexity in discerning the relationship between the two. This complexity precipitated contradictions in the societal ideologies and moral paradigms of that era. Merchants relied on commerce to amass wealth, exhibiting a high degree of utilitarianism



owing to their emphasis on profit. Human inclinations towards self-interest, necessities, desires, and utilitarian pursuits weakened the consideration of moral concepts in safeguarding personal interests. Consequently, the spiritual fortitude regulating conduct diminished, resulting in a disregard for ethical and righteous conduct in the pursuit of gain. Utilitarianism undermined traditional moral constructs. In a study conducted by Yuan Lili titled *Research on the Late Ming Commercial Culture Phenomenon in the Business-related Er Pai*, it was noted that within the statistics of *Er Pai*, eleven novels nearly encompassed familial disputes arising from the material interests of family members. The causes of these conflicts could be categorized into four groups: "children's lack of respect for elders", "elderly individuals' neglect of the young", "fraternal discord", and "absence of genuine marital affection" (Yuan, 2013).



In traditional feudal society of ancient China, the paramount importance was placed on the ethical doctrines of the "Three Cardinal Guides" and the "Five Constant Virtues". The moral framework of the "Five Cardinal Relationships" (五伦) pervaded life and served as the standard for words and deeds. As documented in *Mengzi · Teng Wen Gong I* 《孟子·滕文公上》, "Shun appointed Xie to be the Minister of Instruction, to teach the relations of humanity: how, between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between elders and young, a proper order; and between friends, fidelity" (Ruan, Zhao, Sun, 1982). The Five Cardinal Relationships in Confucianism embody a spiritual force that governs human behavior. Individuals navigate this path to adhere to principles, fulfill their duties, and consequently influence collective consciousness.



Adhering to ethics becomes second nature, avoiding transgressions and upholding moral norms, thereby fostering societal harmony. The Five Constant Virtues—benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, and faith—constitute a vital foundation for preserving familial and societal order. The normative awareness of ethics empowers individuals to regulate their daily conduct and desires, fulfilling their societal roles responsibly, which, in turn, fosters harmonious family relationships and cultivates a positive social ambiance, such as nurturing affection between father and son and maintaining proper order between elders and the young.

However, the traditional social ideology and ethics, under the influence of commercial culture and ideological shifts, undergo changes that reverberate in the realm of the Five Cardinal Relationships. The societal emphasis on economic values impacts moral concepts and human behavioral norms. In a utilitarian society that prioritizes financial gains, business endeavors result in improved standards of living. Beyond meeting basic daily needs, people are able to pursue and gratify desires as they see fit. Yet, the pursuit of desires diminishes the application of traditional moral concepts to achieve behavioral norms and constraints. The flourishing of business culture and evolving ideological paradigms challenge traditional ethical relationships. The collective consciousness of desire disrupts social order, corroding morality and undermining the prevailing social atmosphere. Notably, among the Five Cardinal Relationships, financial entanglements can readily jeopardize the relationships between fathers and sons, brothers, and friends, inducing alterations in these fundamental relationships.



Novels bear the responsibility of conveying truths through words, acting as a vehicle for disseminating ideas while also providing entertainment and enlightenment to the broader populace. People seek not only material pursuits but also yearn for nourishment of their spiritual and intellectual dimensions to enhance their depth of understanding. Novels wield profound influence in this regard. Their value lies in enabling individuals to elevate and enrich their spiritual realms, serving as a source of nourishment for the soul. Novels can utilize fictional or real stories, along with a vivid imagination, to breathe life into the narrative. They pave the way for the plot, piquing readers' curiosity, and prompting contemplation on the novel's underlying significance, ultimately advocating for truth and inspiring hope that the world will realign with the correct course.



In the preface of *Slapping Table in Amazement*, Ling Mengchu communicated a message to readers: "During the Song and Yuan eras, there existed a genre of novels where intriguing events and anecdotes from everyday life were adapted into literature. These narratives often found their way into courtly discussions. The language was colloquial yet persuasive. Though it deviated from the traditional literary faction, this unorthodox style merits appreciation" (Ling, Leng, 2012). In vernacular novels (话本小说), the narrative style typically comprises Ruhua 入话 (preface), Zhenghua 正话 (main story), and Jiewei 结尾 (ending). Generally, the incorporation of a poem or a set of poems captivates the reader's interest. Toward the end, a poem serves to recapitulate and summarize the novel's storyline. With the proliferation of vernacular novels during the Ming Dynasty, some literati writers consciously began emulating this style, employing the form of vernacular novels to craft stories. This endeavor gave rise to the Vernacular Short Novels (白话短



篇小说), intended for leisurely reading at one's desk, known as "Ni Hua Ben" (拟话本).

Slapping Table in Amazement, a Chinese Late Ming Novel, was penned by Ling Mengchu (between the years 1580 and 1644) during the late Ming era (Ling, 1982). This work falls within the genre of Ming Dynasty vernacular short novels and consists of two parts, collectively referred to as *Er Pai*, spanning a total of 80 chapters (Sun, 1965). However, due to the repetition of a story and a Zaju 杂剧 (variety play), the actual volume of the novel stands at 78 chapters (Yao, 2008). Compiled in 1627 (Yao, 2008), the book was printed by the "Shang You Tang" (尚友堂) printing press in 1628 (Ling, 1982). *Er Pai* drew its content from various sources, including scripts of storytellers from the Song and Yuan Dynasty, and stories penned by Ming Dynasty scholars. The novel vividly portrays the lives of common citizens during the late Ming Dynasty, encompassing ideologies, lifestyles, and leisure activities (Tan, 1980). The stories within this novel draw inspiration from diverse sources such as historical records from previous administrations, novels from the Tang and Song Dynasties, as well as miscellaneous notes, folk tales, and other materials contributed by novelists. The swift social transformations of that era profoundly influenced the author, contributing to the novel's innovative content, story structure, and ideological underpinnings. *Slapping Table in Amazement* stands as a significant milestone, capturing the essence of the late Ming Dynasty (Tan, 1980).

1.2 Background Research

1.2.1 Scholars-Merchants Cultural Interaction

The Ming Dynasty instituted the imperial examination system to identify capable individuals for the state bureaucracy, thereby establishing a society focused on examination achievements (Chen, 2004). This system substantially augmented social mobility compared to previous eras. Scholar Jiang Yingke from the Ming Dynasty noted a prevalent pattern in the trajectory of social mobility. When ascending, the path typically traversed through stages of "a poor family, a self-sufficient family, a well-educated family, a family with social standing, and ultimately a prosperous and influential family". Conversely, in a declining family, the path led from "a wealthy and influential family, a family indulging in a life of excess, a family compelled to sell assets to survive, and a financially struggling family" (Jiang, 2000). To thrive in the Ming society, which placed a premium on the imperial examination, individuals needed to adopt a frugal lifestyle and dedicate themselves to diligent study for success in the exams. Conversely, indulgence and idleness precipitated a decline in social status.

Throughout the early Ming Dynasty to the mid-19th century, China's population surged manifold, but the number of candidates participating in the imperial examination system did not proportionally increase in line with the growing number of scholars. Consequently, the competition for recognition and success was exceedingly fierce. The

odds of securing an official position were notably slim, prompting a shift in societal aspirations from pursuing a Confucian scholar's path to embracing commerce, embodying a prevailing trend (Yu, 1996). Wang Ermin (2002) employed the term "vulgarity culture" (庸俗文化) to describe the culture of common people (庶民文化), contrasting it with "refinement culture" (典雅文化), which epitomized the culture of officials and the gentry (官绅文化). Essentially, "vulgarity culture" encompasses the cultural life of common folk and shares a certain boundary with "refinement culture". Though they fall under the same category, a natural distinction exists between refinement and vulgarity. These two cultural domains are interlinked, yet each manifests its own characteristics of refinement and vulgarity (Wang, 2002).

The ultimate pursuit in life is shaped by the paramount value concepts derived from a thoughtful selection in one's life path. This holds true not only for scholars but also for merchants. A significant number of scholars hailed from humble backgrounds and experienced the trials and tribulations brought about by the harsh realities of life. Consequently, scholars engaged with the business realm to amass wealth, striving to attain the ultimate goal of leading a life of leisure and seclusion (闲隐). They viewed this affluence as a means to establish stability in life. Scholars dedicated themselves to fostering refinement culture, finding immense pleasure in its cultivation. However, due to practical circumstances, they were compelled to partake in the commercial sphere, which embodied elements of a more common and coarse business culture. Nevertheless, the scholars' desires and steadfast pursuit of their goals remained unwavering. Their engagement with the business community proved lucrative, enabling them to realize their ultimate aspirations.

Merchants, adhering to the principles of business operations, sought profits through trade. Even those from culturally disadvantaged backgrounds consciously directed their progeny towards scholarly pursuits. In their ambition to ascend the social hierarchy, merchants amassed wealth and intentionally groomed their offspring to embrace scholarly roles. They emulated scholars, amassed valuable collections, and endeavored to alter their societal status. Establishing an environment of refinement at a material level, they cultivated a scholarly atmosphere, influencing future generations through their surroundings, aspiring for refinement and scholarly pursuits.

Since the mid-Ming Dynasty, the delineation between scholars and merchants in society has become increasingly blurred, paralleling significant shifts in the social structure of the Ming and Qing Dynasties due to adjustments in the class dynamics of scholars and merchants (Yu, 1996). During this era, there was heightened reverence for the "governance of life" philosophy and the notion of "relying on business for a living". It was advocated that scholars ought to possess an independent economic foundation and refrain from being "dependent on others" to maintain personal autonomy. This emphasized the societal valuation of human desires and underscored the significance of "governance of life". The emergence of the "New Simin Theory" (新四民论) marked a turning point in the relationship between scholars and merchants. Wang Yangming (王阳明) acknowledged the need for equal recognition of the "Dao" (道) of the "Old Simin" (旧四民) and extended the "Xin Xue Theory" (心学论) to scholars, farmers, laborers,

and merchants (士、农、工、商), encompassing the realm of "career" (业) (Yu, 1996).

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the contributions of the merchant class to society and their intrinsic social value were no longer disregarded. This transformation was indicative of a shifting social structure, manifesting as an order of "scholars, merchants, farmers, and laborers" (士、商、农、工) (Yu, 1996).

The intertwining of scholars and merchants led to a nuanced and dialectical relationship between "refinement" and "vulgarity," compelling an effort to distinguish and establish a separation point between the two. The evolving definitions of refinement and vulgarity during the Ming and Qing Dynasties were primarily shaped by the perspectives of scholars and the dynamics between scholars and merchants, as well as the differentiation between artistic endeavors and commercial goods (Wang, 2006). Furthermore, the distinctions were delineated in terms of leisure and hermitage, scholars and artistic pursuits being seen as refinement, while engagement in officialdom, merchant activities, and merchandise were considered vulgarity (Wang, 2007).

Scholars' culture emerged as a symbol of refinement, representing their spiritual pursuits. This is evident in scholars' avid appreciation of antique treasures and their yearning for the serene lifestyle associated with pavilions and gardens. The creation of literary and artistic activities and the establishment of cultural and artistic spaces served as havens for scholars, allowing them to subtly express their discontent with the rigid imperial

examination system or their lack of success in official careers through silent protests (Wang, 2007).

The life philosophy centered on leisure and hermitage emanates from a foundation of leisure and refinement. Scholars adopt this philosophy not only to establish a personal brand but also to distance themselves from the complexities and disturbances of everyday life. In moments of frustration within the academic sphere, scholars often opt for a leisurely retreat to their roots, finding self-affirmation within a community that aligns with their values. They relish engaging with peers through their literary prowess and other strengths.

However, scholars perpetually grapple with the dichotomy of choosing between pursuing an official career ("become an official" - 仕) and embracing the life of a recluse ("living hermit" - 隱). Although the distinction between toil (勞) and reprieve (逸) in their actual lives accentuates the merits of living as a recluse over the demands of officialdom, scholars find it challenging to completely forsake the societal value attributed to the imperial examination and official positions. Consequently, they cannot wholeheartedly abandon the pursuit of an official career.

Scholars, aspiring to attain official positions through the imperial examinations, face increasing hurdles. Faced with repeated failures in these examinations, they grapple with a pervasive sense of losing value and experiencing time-related pressure. The psychological journey from regret to disdain propels scholars to remedy this void by prioritizing "leisure" as the cornerstone of their lives. This choice liberates them from the

constraints of commonplace obligations, allowing ample time to immerse themselves in the joys of refined spaces and derive sustenance from these experiences.

Scholars' appreciation of antiques has given rise to a distinct culture, seamlessly intertwining with their way of life. However, with the surge in business development, merchants heavily invest in acquiring a multitude of treasures from scholars and then assign market values to these items. The merchants, often neglecting the inherent aesthetic value and quality of these treasures, have irked scholars who disdain the merchants' business practices, viewing their collection of treasures as commercial rather than artful. A significant portion of merchants lack a comprehensive understanding of the origin and true appreciation of antique treasures. In this context, scholars can step in, leveraging their expertise in dialectics of antiques to mediate transactions between merchants and buyers, deriving benefits from the process.

Yet, a fraction of scholars resorts to deception, deliberately falsifying the authenticity of antique treasures and even circulating counterfeit items, reaping substantial profits and manipulating the antique market using their exceptional appreciation skills to define refinement and vulgarity. The involvement of the business community within the refined cultural circle has introduced cultural tensions for scholars. While seeking profits, scholars grapple with the crisis of culture gradually succumbing to vulgarity. In response, scholars advocate the "Reasonable Taboos Theory" (宜忌论) to discern refinement from vulgarity and differentiate between those appreciating genuine value and those with superficial knowledge, aiming to correct undesirable practices (Wang, 2006).

These contradictions underscore the scholars' inner struggle between the realms of refinement and vulgarity. To preserve the intellectual superiority and dignity of the cultural circle, scholars deliberately define the boundaries of refined and vulgar culture, actively repelling the encroachment of external, cruder influences. Simultaneously, to cater to real-life demands, scholars engage with the business community as connoisseurs, reaping benefits. Similarly, merchants prioritize wealth accumulation as a life goal. However, once their practical needs are met, they channel their resources to groom future generations into scholars, striving to transcend commerce, enhance their cultural standing, and elevate their social identity.

 05-4506832 Scholars harbored a sense of envy for the achievements of Ming and Qing merchants. The donation system during the Ming and Qing Dynasties allowed merchants to fulfill their aspirations of attaining official positions, acquiring fame, and establishing themselves as influential gentry-merchants in their localities (Yu, 1996). This system gave rise to a distinctive scholars-merchants culture within Ming and Qing society. While the donation system could indeed help satisfy the affluent individuals' desire to enter officialdom, it had its pros and cons. Entrusting positions to individuals lacking adequate knowledge could lead to ineffective governance and a disregard for the fundamental "Five Cardinal Relationships". Those in power devoid of understanding in the teachings of sages and the principles of officialdom could not serve as exemplary figures to civilize the populace. This could pose a significant threat to local and even national politics.

Engaging in business is a legitimate means of livelihood. Scholars, in their pursuit of personal ideals, joined the business community to hasten the realization of a refined and leisurely life. Investing in business became a way to meet these expectations, utilizing vulgarity to achieve the aspirations of refinement culture. Scholars demonstrated noble integrity while dealing with the harsh realities of life, eventually transitioning from a culture rooted in vulgarity to one steeped in refinement.

For merchants, business was a means of survival and expanding their family enterprises. Beyond engaging with their peers in the business realm, merchants were also tied to the market's interests. This connection led them to aspire for themselves or their descendants to become scholars, seeking exposure to literary poetry, refining their temperament, and distancing themselves from vulgarity culture. Their desire was to transition from a culture of vulgarity to refinement culture and experience the spiritual prosperity associated with scholarship.

Both scholars and merchants were deeply engrossed in their individual aspirations. The genesis of the scholars-merchants culture and its influence from traditional culture were inseparable from humanity's inherent desires and pursuits for fame, wealth, and material possessions. This innate human nature necessitates the establishment of guidelines to prevent deviation and ensure that pursuits align with appropriate standards.

The emergence and development of the scholars-merchants culture during the mid-Ming Dynasty marked a significant societal and cultural shift. This culture not only

represented a departure from traditional and conservative thinking in ancient China but also reflected the burgeoning influence of new social ideologies, injecting a new dynamism into the established feudal society. During this era, a fresh societal ambiance began to take shape, paving the way for a culture where scholars and merchants could mutually benefit, align with their respective expectations, and infuse vigor and hope into their pursuits.

The culture of scholars-merchants acted as a catalyst, allowing scholars and merchants to complement each other and reach their goals. Its impact was profound, contributing significantly to the fabric of late Ming Dynasty society, particularly in terms of social morality and spiritual civilization. The intricate interplay of these elements within the scholars-merchants culture holds invaluable insights into the transformations that transpired in the late Ming Dynasty's social landscape. Understanding this cultural evolution is crucial to grasp the shifts that were occurring in the broader societal context during that time. Moreover, the influence and inspiration generated by this culture on subsequent generations should not be underestimated, as it continues to be a reference point for understanding the changes that unfolded during the late Ming Dynasty and beyond.

1.2.2 Considerations for the Selection of Business-related Chapters

The novels that originated from street talks and hearsays, often termed as the "unorthodox school", hold significant objective value over time. Despite being initially criticized and viewed skeptically, this literary genre has evolved and garnered appreciation, transforming

from "vulgar people's talk" into a unique and widely embraced style. The novels employ a style characterized by wariness and irony, intending to persuade and admonish society, highlighting their merit and relevance.

In this thesis, the focus is on using *Er Pai* as an example to comprehend the author's social status, customs, and culture during the late Ming Dynasty. The aim is to explore the social morality and civilization of late Ming Dynasty by analyzing the content of the novels. By examining *Er Pai* and delving into the official history of the Ming Dynasty, particularly the Ming History, a comprehensive understanding of the society at that time can be achieved. The novel's distinctive style provides an engaging perspective to explore and depict various aspects of late Ming society.

Er Pai vividly portrays the ideology, lifestyle, and leisure activities of grassroots society during the late Ming era. Through its fictional narrative, the novel fearlessly describes the society of the late Ming Dynasty, reflecting the lifestyle of individuals from diverse social classes. The narrative is replete with multifaceted characters, each with unique personalities, and weaves a complex storyline. Hence, analyzing the value of the scholars-merchants culture and the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty through this lens is highly relevant and appropriate.

Ling Mengchu, through his work in *Er Pai*, intricately crafted a diverse array of characters from various social classes in ancient Chinese society. The lifestyle and ideological fabric of Ming Dynasty society were vividly depicted, especially within the

chapters focusing on business, offering a reflective mirror to the contemporary societal milieu. *Er Pai* delves into the lives of scholars and merchants, depicting their relationships, status changes, and societal attitudes toward them during that period. The characters are well-defined, and the narrative is enriched with a captivating and varied storyline, occupying a significant portion of the novel.

From the unique personalities of scholars and merchants, their modes of interaction, shifts in their societal standing, and the societal perceptions of them during that era, *Er Pai* sheds light on the nuances of the scholars-merchants culture and the prevailing social morality of late Ming Dynasty. Notably, *Er Pai* contains numerous engaging chapters with intriguing stories, such as those found in Volume 1 of *Slapping Table in Amazement-First Series*. For instance, the protagonist Wen Ruoxu, initially a literate individual, ventures into the world of business and maritime trade, ultimately amassing wealth through a fortuitous encounter with treasures.

The characters and stories in *Er Pai* encompass a wide spectrum of experiences. They include knowledgeable individuals like Han Ziwen and accomplished merchants like Guo Qilang and Wang Lu. These stories bring out the complexities of their lives, ambitions, and the challenges they faced, offering a comprehensive view of the society and its dynamics during the Ming Dynasty.

By delving into the narratives within *Er Pai*, particularly those related to scholars and merchants, one can glean insights into the cultural, social, and moral fabric of late



Ming Dynasty China. Ling Mengchu's portrayal of characters and their experiences in *Er Pai* serves as a valuable lens through which to understand the intricate dynamics of the scholars-merchants culture and the societal norms prevalent during that era.

The intricacies of the stories within *Er Pai*, as illustrated in the preceding chapters, reveal a narrative that is both intricate and emotionally resonant. The author's skillful depiction of the plot elicits a profound emotional impact. The experiences of the novel's protagonists and the societal context in which they navigate align seamlessly with the social ideology and culture prevalent during the Ming Dynasty. Therefore, this thesis places its focus on the business-related chapters of *Er Pai*, aiming to analyze the scholars-merchants culture depicted within these chapters. The objective is to categorize and analyze the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty, as vividly portrayed in the novel. This analysis holds promise for delving into the causes and ramifications of the depicted culture and societal morals.

By immersing in the exploration of the scholars-merchants culture and the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty, this research can marry the desires of the characters as portrayed in the novel with the societal culture of that era. Leveraging insights from prior research, a meticulous and comprehensive analysis will be undertaken. The objective is to offer a thorough examination that not only enhances our understanding of the culture and societal norms portrayed in *Er Pai* but also sheds light on the desires and aspirations of the people during the late Ming Dynasty. Through this approach, we aim to present a nuanced



and detailed analysis that adds depth to our comprehension of this fascinating period in Chinese history.

1.3 Problem Statement

1.3.1 The Gap of Study

Based on previous research, this thesis focuses on searching and discussing topics related to the research of this thesis to understand the current academic research status. Through previous literature research, it was found that the part about the culture of scholars and merchants focused on the scholarly style, scholar-bureaucrats, and the merchant spirit, culture or business culture. The literature that discusses the combination of scholars and merchants focuses on the relationship between scholars and merchants, the image of scholars and merchants, or the interpenetrating characteristics of the two. It can be seen that the literatures that conduct in-depth discussions from the perspective of scholars-merchants culture are relatively few. The literature that takes "research on scholars and merchants in *Er Pai*" and "research on social morality in *Er Pai*" as research angles mainly focuses on the image of scholars and merchants, commercial cultural phenomena, relations between scholars and merchants, merchants ethics, business ethics, or the analysis and discussion of desires and pursuit of interests from the perspective of the characters of women, monks and nuns, and explore the general development of social morality in the

late Ming Dynasty. After reviewing previous research data and literature, it was found that the research scope of this thesis is still lacking in the existing literature. In view of the imperfection of current academic results, the link between the two topics is rarely discussed side by side. For example, there is a lack of discussion and research materials on the joint discussion of scholars-merchants culture and social morality in the late Ming Dynasty. Therefore, this thesis attempts to sort out and further elaborate on the research topic of this thesis based on previous research, in order to study the correlation between scholars-merchants culture and social morality in the late Ming Dynasty and to demonstrate the social cultural value of the late Ming Dynasty.

The transformative forces shaping society underscore the intricate interplay and integration of societal order and social structure. The domains of economy, society, ideology, and mentality are intimately connected and exert a profound influence on daily life (Chen, 2004). Those born in the Ming Dynasty were destined to experience a period of significant social change. The mid-Ming Dynasty witnessed a society undergoing remarkable transformation, characterized by extreme and distinct features of change. Yu Yingshih has aptly labeled this period in late Ming as "one of the most important periods of social and cultural change in Chinese history" (Yu, 1992). The Ming Dynasty held a prominent position in Chinese history for nearly three centuries, offering a historical backdrop that is

not only rich but also diverse. Notably, the era was marked by pronounced social and cultural transformations.

In the face of such rapid societal and cultural changes, numerous scholars were drawn to observe and study the history of the Ming Dynasty from the late 16th century to the early 17th century. They sought to comprehend the causes behind these changes and ultimately arrived at similar views. Scholar Chow Kaiwing, for instance, commented on the enigmatic and contradictory elements prevalent in Chinese society during the 16th century. These elements encompassed urbanization and a thriving urban culture, improved educational opportunities, the rise of affluent landlords, and a decline in patriarchal governance and familial constraints (Chow, 1994). Russian scholar Voskresensky highlighted the critical position of 17th century China in its history, emphasizing the rapid changes during this era. He also pointed out the distinctive characteristics from a social science perspective. The late Ming era was characterized by a precarious state in which existing social pillars such as philosophy, science, religion, and conventional ethics faced significant threats to their existence. This critical juncture demanded a restoration and recalibration of social order. Simultaneously, the turbulent era provided an opportune moment for societal mentality and cultural ideology to engage in deep reflection and transformation (Voskresensky, 1996).

In *Shi Ji: The Biography of Huaiyin Marquis* 《史记·淮阴侯列传》, Sima Qian (司马迁) deliberately intertwined the concept of governing one's life with the role of merchants, leading to a profound discussion. He specifically mentions Han Xin (韩信)

and remarks: "When he was a commoner, he was poor and lacked good deeds, rendering him ineligible for official recommendation. Unable to rely on business for sustenance, he often resorted to begging for food, which made him disliked by many" (Sima, 1963). Moreover, "Xu Heng (许衡), a prominent scholar of the Yuan Dynasty, introduced his well-known 'Theory of Governing Life' stating: 'For scholars, the governance of one's life takes precedence. Without proper management of one's life, progress in learning can be impeded. Those pursuing reckless advancement and becoming engrossed in profits find themselves in an embarrassing position due to the lack of governance of life... The one who governs life is akin to a farmer, laborer, or merchant. Scholars and gentlemen should adopt a livelihood akin to farming. Although merchants occupy a lower rung in the social hierarchy, they have a role to play. Nothing is insurmountable if they do not forsake righteousness and principles, or if it provides temporary relief for a while.'" (Zhao, 2006; cited in Ma, 2012) This highlights the significance of the theory of governing life in traditional society.

Exploration into the New Simin Theory reveals a shift in the views of Confucian scholars during the Ming and Qing Dynasties concerning "private" (私), "human desire" (人欲), and "governance of life" (治生), as well as a shift in their attitudes towards merchants (Yu, 1996). Confucian scholars of that time were reevaluating the social status and value of the merchant class. In the era where the aspiration shifted from "aspiring to be Confucian scholars" to "becoming a merchant", the spirit nurtured by Confucianism persisted, and the implementation of Confucian values found its reflection in the business

sphere. This evolution indicates the gradual integration of Confucian ethics into the business community.

The social structure of the Ming and Qing Dynasties primarily witnessed changes in the status of scholars and merchants. Wang Yangming passionately advocated for "the Simin of the ancients were different professionally but identical in their pursuit of the way" (古者四民异业而同道) as depicted in the New Simin Theory. With his conscientious "Xin Xue" 心学 (mind learning), he presented his perspective on the equitable treatment of the four careers. He emphasized that to activate the innate goodness of human nature (尽心), investing in a career is no different from "sage's learning" (圣人之学). He even posited that scholars in society were more oriented towards interests than merchants, challenging established preconceptions (Yu, 1996). During the Ming Dynasty, the business community gradually recognized its social value and realized it could compete with the scholar class. This gave rise to a societal structure where "scholars and merchants" were of paramount importance, and "farmers and laborers" belonged to the lower echelons of society. A societal situation emerged in the Qing Dynasty where scholars were considered inferior to merchants (Yu, 1996).

The emergence of the phenomenon "no longer think of Confucian scholars as aspirations but become a merchant" (弃儒就贾) during the transition from the Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty was due to the change in political power. Survivors of the Ming Dynasty sought to avoid being subjugated under the Qing Dynasty's regime and found it conducive to embrace the New Simin Theory. Scholars' newfound acceptance of

merchants can be attributed to the rapid population growth during the Ming Dynasty, which rendered scholars unable to secure official positions through imperial examinations. This pushed them towards pursuing business as an alternative. Additionally, the favorable conditions presented to merchants in the Ming and Qing Dynasties were appealing to scholars. Engaging in business not only allowed them to accumulate wealth but also enabled them to attain fame and ascend to the status of respected gentry's merchants through the donation system. This underscores the foresight of the New Simin Theory regarding the prospective development of merchants.

1.3.3 Business Ethics and Morality of Merchants

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, acquiring a certain level of knowledge was deemed essential for success in business. This led to the publication of numerous commercial books, providing valuable references for merchants. Concurrently, folk literature, including novels and dramas, gained significant popularity. This cultural trend was closely linked to the flourishing urban merchant class, prompting scholars to pay attention to folk literature (Yu, 1996). These commercial texts and folk literature often contained popularized Confucian teachings, enabling merchants to glean insights into Confucian ethics and beyond. Merchants, possessing a foundational level of knowledge, also showed an inclination towards exploring religious topics. Their conviction in Confucianism as a catalyst for career advancement propelled them to earnestly study Confucian morality.

Post the mid-Ming Dynasty, merchant groups with distinct regional identities, such as "Hui merchants" (徽商), "Fujian merchants" (闽商), "Jin merchants" (晋商), and "Zhe merchants" (浙商), emerged and gained prominence. Many of these merchants were significantly influenced by Confucian culture. Their commercial activities distinctly mirrored the Confucian style prevalent in the Chinese business community. These merchants developed unique business approaches infused with Confucian values (Yuan, 2013). This intertwining of commerce and Confucianism further underscores the deep influence of Confucian ethics within the business realm of the time.

The term "Ru Yi" (儒意) can be interpreted as a methodology for understanding the business practices of the merchant community, comprehending objective patterns, and effectively learning and applying them (Yu, 1996). This theory can find application within Confucianism, particularly in aspects like "governance of people" (治人), "governance of affairs" (治事), and "governance of the country" (治国), aligning with the principle of "knowing one's subordinates well enough to assign their jobs commensurate with their abilities" (知人善任) prevalent in the business community. It transforms Confucianism's concepts of governing a country into principles applicable to business operations (Yu, 1996), focusing on the rational accumulation of wealth. This concept resonates with Wang Yangming's notion of "different professions but identical pursuit of the way" (异业而同道).

Moreover, some merchants have integrated Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism into their business methodologies. Merchants who can grasp the inner moral principles of Confucianism and Buddhism achieve a flexible approach. The relationship between "Confucianism" (儒) and "merchant" (贾) can be analyzed from two perspectives: first, positioning "Confucianism" (儒学) based on the knowledge and cultural accomplishments possessed by merchants, and second, exploring the influence of Confucian moral norms on the actual behavior of merchants (Yu, 1996). This integration demonstrates how merchants embraced and adapted philosophical and ethical principles to enhance their business practices and ethical conduct.

During the 16th to the 18th century in Chinese society, ethical conduct among merchants played a significant role, constrained by business ethics. This notion is akin to Max Weber's discussion on Protestant ethics, where "industry" (勤) and "frugality" (俭) were believed to promote the development of capitalism. These virtues permeated society due to the influence of religion, and among the merchant class during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, they were particularly pronounced (Yu, 1996). The teachings of Confucius and Mencius emphasized the importance of truthfulness and sincerity, asserting that sincerity was fundamental to human nature and crucial for influencing others (Ruan, He, Xing, 1982). In ancient Chinese merchant novels, integrity (诚信) was regarded as the paramount moral quality for merchants, forming the foundation of their business ethics and competitiveness. Integrity was seen as essential for the healthy growth of merchants (Qiu, 2004; cited in Yu, 2014).

Moreover, Neo-Confucian ethics highlighted "honesty" (诚) and "not deceiving" (不欺) as critical principles, aligning with "the way of heaven" (天之道). This provided a moral transcendence basis, and merchants in the Ming and Qing Dynasties promoted these concepts through Neo-Confucianism and folk religions, fostering a strong ethical business culture (Yu, 1996). Merchants firmly believed in moral ethics associated with "heaven" (天) and "principle" (理), often integrating the theories of "ghosts and gods" (鬼神之说) derived from folk beliefs. These beliefs had a similar effect to the theoretical functions of "heaven" or "principle" (Yu, 1996). Even though scholars and bureaucrats were part of an elite culture (上层文化) belonging to the upper class, they also believed in popular culture (通俗文化) derived from folk beliefs. They embraced concepts like "heaven and earth" (天地), ghosts, gods, and retribution (报应) to guide their behavior, considering this "second culture" as a moral compass (Yu, 1996). This intertwining of ethical and spiritual beliefs played a crucial role in shaping the moral fabric of the merchant class during this period.

Merchants in the Ming Dynasty exhibited profound understanding of the "way of business" (贾道). Beyond simply pursuing profits, this concept encompassed meaningful interpretations and referred to the use of rational and effective methods to achieve business objectives. Merchants metaphorically equated their business pursuits to the great ambitions and state power of an emperor, underscoring their sense of superiority in their endeavors. They firmly believed that their vocation was endowed with solemnity, sacred meaning, and objective value. This belief system paralleled the values held by

scholar-bureaucrats, where being a "merchant of good character" (良贾) was considered comparable in value to being a "master of Confucianism" (闾儒) (Yu, 1996).

The concept of the "way of business" allowed merchants to autonomously adhere to business ethics, norms, and uphold their own "name" (名) and "morality" (德). Merchants during the Ming and Qing Dynasties were akin to scholars in terms of their knowledge level due to the shift in aspirations from aspiring to be Confucian scholars to embracing a merchant's path. Leveraging their knowledge grounded in Confucianism, merchants effectively regulated the market's regular patterns. Their highly rational approach, combined with traditional cultural resources, charted a new trajectory that transformed their pursuits into a distinct "way of business". For instance, engaging impoverished clan members or relatives as "buddies" (伙计) in business became a crucial human resource strategy for executing business functions. Additionally, the emblematic "merchant of good character" who advocated for "small profits but quick turnover" (薄利多销) not only exemplified the desire to perform the task well (工欲善其事) in their profession but also underlined their commitment to following the "way of business". This reflected the elevation of social value and status for merchants and the creation of an autonomous and superior "way of business" within their vocation. Confucianism indeed profoundly influenced the conduct of individuals during that era (Yu, 1996).

1.4 Objectives of the Study

This thesis is intended to explore the culture of scholars-merchants and social morality in the late Ming Dynasty in *Er Pai* from the perspective of the development of the novel, the background of the late Ming Dynasty, and the business-related roles portrayed by Ling Mengchu in *Er Pai*. I believe that the scholars-merchants culture and the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty shown in *Er Pai* can be used as a reference for analyzing the social status of the late Ming Dynasty. Therefore, the objectives of the study of this thesis can be summarized as the following points:

i. Discuss the cause and influence of the scholars-merchants culture in the late

ii. Discuss the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty.

iii. Discuss the scholars-merchants culture and the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty presented in *Er Pai*.

1.5 Research Questions

The research of this thesis is mainly centered on the culture of scholars-merchants and social morality of the late Ming Dynasty shown in *Er Pai*. In my submission, the culture

of scholars-merchants and the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty highlighted in *Er Pai* are indeed affected by various factors. For example, the background of the late Ming Dynasty, the development of novels, economic development, popular academic trends and public life, etc., so the research questions in this thesis can be summarized as the following points:

- i. What was the cause and influence of the scholars-merchants culture in the late Ming Dynasty?
- ii. How did the scholars-merchants culture impact the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty?
- iii. What is the culture of scholars-merchants and the social morality of the late Ming Dynasty presented in *Er Pai*?

1.6 Conceptual Framework of Research

The research presented in this thesis delves into two pivotal domains: the culture of scholars-merchants and the social morality during the late Ming Dynasty. Methodologically, this thesis employs Textual Analysis, Discourse Analysis, and Historical Research Method. The former focuses on linguistic analysis within the text, while the latter delves into the practice and manifestation of social culture during the Ming

Dynasty, allowing for an insightful grasp of the era's socio-cultural characteristics and phenomena.

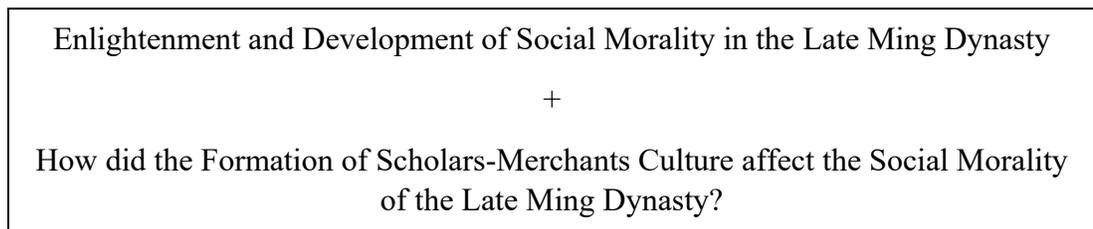
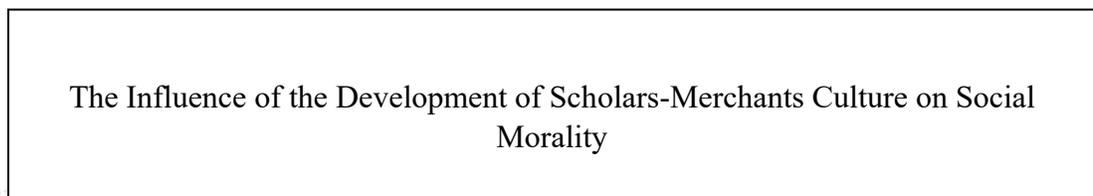
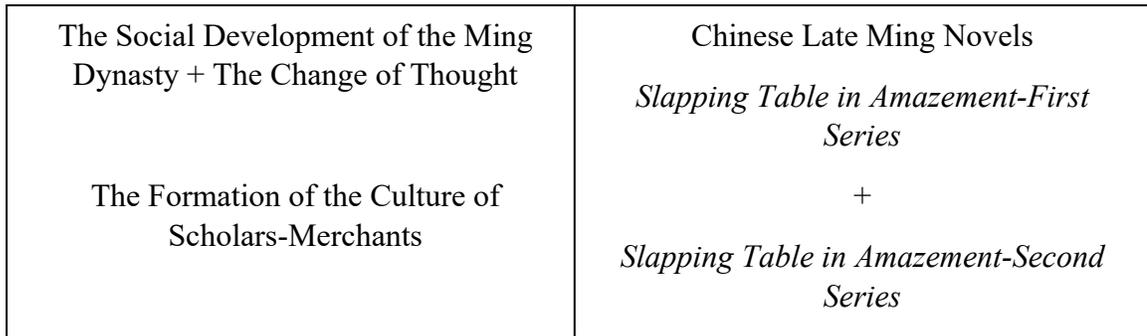
The methodology intertwines literary and historical analysis to explore the culture of scholars-merchants and the social morality prevalent in the late Ming Dynasty. Amidst the historical currents, this research endeavors to discern what drove the evolution of social morality during the late Ming Dynasty and how the emergence of scholars-merchants culture influenced it. Consequently, the research framework encompasses several key dimensions, notably comprehending the genesis of scholars-merchants culture through an understanding of Ming Dynasty's societal progression and contemporary ideological shifts.

This understanding will pave the way to explore the impact of scholars-merchants culture on the broader social morality landscape.

Furthermore, the study endeavors to elucidate the inspiration and evolution of social morality during the late Ming Dynasty, as well as the nuanced interplay with the burgeoning scholars-merchants culture. In this endeavor, the thesis will draw on *Er Pai* to decipher the embodiment of late Ming Dynasty's social morality within the realm of the novel. The conceptual framework for this research is depicted as follows:

Historical Method + Textual Analysis & Discourse Analysis





The Embodiment of Social Morality in the Late Ming Dynasty
(Public and private; righteousness and profit; benevolence and destiny)
(公、私；义、利；仁、命)



The Research Result of the Culture of Scholars-Merchants and the Social
Morality of Late Ming Dynasty in *Er Pai*

1.7.1 The Culture of Scholars-Merchants

This thesis will focus on the culture of scholars-merchants revealed in *Er Pai*, so interpret this term to explain the important concepts of this thesis.

The term "Shi" (士) encapsulates individuals esteemed for their knowledge and scholarly prowess, often recognized as intellectuals or scholars within society. This group predominantly aspires to pursue a path leading to officialdom, referred to as "become an official" (仕). It encompasses various individuals, including impoverished scholars



aspiring for enrollment in the imperial examination, reclusive hermits eschewing worldly acclaim, diligent students endeavoring to gain admission into esteemed institutions, and those who have successfully attained official positions (Chen, 2008). The definition extends to "Shi Ren" (士人), denoting a collective of educated and literate scholars proficient in writing (Chiang, 2019).

Across changing epochs, the perception and essence of scholars have evolved. During the late Ming era, "scholars" not only denoted scholars-bureaucrats but also included those who achieved official positions through imperial examinations. Some chose a life of contemplation and abstained from officialdom, while others actively engaged in the Simin class (Chiang, 2019). This transformation underscores the dynamic societal interpretations and roles assumed by scholars during the late Ming Dynasty.

The term "merchants" broadly encompasses individuals involved in various commercial activities. This includes peddlers, carriers, as well as those engaged in commerce and handicrafts. The category of "merchants" encompasses a diverse array of individuals engaged in trade and related endeavors (Chen, 2008).

Business, as a vocation, stems from the transactional process of gaining profit through the exchange of goods. It represents a profession wherein individuals negotiate exchanges, swapping what they possess for what they require. Merchants, therefore, represent a vital segment of society actively engaged in these commercial activities (Sun,



2010). The essence of commerce lies in this exchange-driven economic activity, whereby goods and services are traded to achieve beneficial transactions for all involved parties.

The term "culture" (文化) embodies an intricate amalgamation encompassing knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, habits, and a range of other abilities acquired by members of a society. It constitutes the collective heritage of knowledge, beliefs, values, and norms transmitted and inherited through generations. Culture serves as a toolkit for individuals within a society, aiding them in addressing daily challenges (Goodman, 2000; cited in Sun, 2010).

As per Yu Jindong, the scenario of the "blurring boundaries between scholars and merchants" does indeed exist. However, this "integration of scholars and merchants" (士商融合) does not signify an entirely equitable exchange between the two groups. Primarily, merchants aspire to cultivate an environment akin to that of Confucian scholars. For instance, merchants may request scholars to compose epitaphs on their behalf and actively seek social interaction with scholars. On the other hand, scholars seldom initiate actions to align with merchant preferences. It's evident that fundamental changes in scholars' perceptions of merchants do not occur merely due to merchants' unilateral attempts to align with scholars (Yu, 2015).

Evidently, the "scholars-merchants culture" manifests as an amalgamation of the two prominent societal classes—the "Simin Theory", encompassing scholars and the

merchant class. This fusion gives rise to an observable and traceable behavioral paradigm, delineating a specific approach and attitude within society.

During the late Ming Dynasty, the surge of a burgeoning business culture was notable due to the increasing affluence within the merchant class. Scholars, enticed by the prospects of financial security and aspiring for a life of leisure, began to participate in commercial activities. Conversely, merchants sought to elevate their family's standing by acquiring scholarly distinction. Both groups carried their unique set of expectations, converging in a dynamic interaction. This symbiosis not only gratified their ambitions for fame and fortune but also spearheaded a transformative shift in the social culture and values of the era.

This thesis adopts the outlined concept of the scholars-merchants culture, utilizing it as a framework to comprehend and portray the embodiment of this distinctive culture within *Er Pai*. The interplay and representation of scholars and merchants in the novel provide a lens to analyze the broader societal dynamics and cultural evolution during the late Ming Dynasty.

1.7.2 Social Morality

In accordance with *The Analects · Shu Er* 《论语·述而》, emphasis is placed on aligning one's will with the path of duty, firmly grasping all attainments in goodness, striving for

perfect virtue, and finding relaxation and enjoyment in the refined arts (Ruan, He, Xing, 1982). This reflects the intertwined nature of Chinese social morality and ethics, with traditional moral principles like the "Five Cardinal Relationships" exerting profound influence over individual growth, family harmony, and societal progress.

The traditional moral tenets, encompassing values such as reverence and humility towards rulers and ministers, and the veneration of elders coupled with the protection of the young, permeate across all social strata. These principles elevate the significance of individual moral development, transforming it into a normative behavioral standard, thus establishing the foundational benchmarks for social morality.

Li Jianhua and Li Hao, in their work *On Social Morality and Individual Morality in the Horizon of Harmonious Society*, expound on the evolution of social morality. They posit that in traditional society, the distinction between social morality and individual morality was negligible. Morality encompassed not only the ethical fabric of society, which had shared principles and universality, but also an individual's internal character development, marked by uniqueness and distinction. Ethics and virtue were intricately interconnected. It is in modern society that a shift occurred, where institutional ethics, with social ethics at its core, began to develop, creating a notable tension with individual morality. This divergence led to the classification of morality into social morality and individual morality (Li & Li, 2005).

Traditional Chinese social morality centers on the paramount values of social harmony and stability, with the "Five Cardinal Relationships" serving as a fundamental criterion dictating social interactions. Adherence to prescribed rules of human relations, encompassing respect, obedience, and appropriate conduct, is imperative. This construct acts as a regulatory force, shaping behavior by upholding social hierarchy and decorum, ultimately fostering an inclusive social ambiance through practiced etiquette.

However, traditional Chinese ethical relationships often struggle to achieve a balanced resolution of power conflicts. Despite the emphasis on the "Five Cardinal Relationships" to govern behavior, the inherent challenge lies in the limited capacity of this framework to effectively address disputes due to its relatively weak distinctions in asserting respect and humility. Paradoxically, it can even serve as a catalyst for conflicts, particularly among those with weaker standings in society, as they may use this system as a means to initiate disputes.

Conversely, adopting "impartiality" (公正) as the cornerstone of social morality offers a potential solution. This principle aligns with the desire for fair and equitable treatment, satisfying societal expectations. While achieving 100% compliance with the criterion of equality for all is difficult at a legal level, making impartiality the bedrock of social morality establishes a "minimum moral guarantee" (最低限度的道德保证) for fair treatment, indispensable for upholding social harmony and ensuring human rights equity. It provides a vital ethical foundation essential for maintaining a just and cohesive society.

1.7.3 Five Cardinal Relationships

The Confucian concept of the "Five Cardinal Relationships" (五伦) holds profound influence as the foundational framework shaping the dynamics of traditional society. Often referred to as "Ethics" (伦常), these relationships intricately interweave into daily life, embodying the status of individuals within the family, society, and the broader nation. The "Five Cardinal Relationships" encompass critical bonds: the sovereign and minister, father and son, elders and young, husband and wife, and friendships—each indispensable in a well-functioning group society (Qiu, 2013).

In the historical text *Mengzi · Teng Wen Gong I*, it is elucidated that individuals possess a moral nature. However, without proper education and guidance, if only provided with material comfort, they tend to regress to a state resembling that of beasts. The sage Shun recognized this and appointed Xie as the Minister of Instruction, emphasizing the teaching of humane relations. It delineated the importance of affection between father and son, righteousness between sovereign and minister, attention to distinct roles between husband and wife, proper order between old and young, and fidelity amongst friends (Ruan, Zhao, Sun, 1982).

Essentially, the "Five Cardinal Relationships" represent the foundational ethical principles governing human existence within traditional society. They distinguish humans

from beasts, as individuals assimilate the knowledge required to discern ethical relations and comprehend the essence of these relationships. The comprehension and adherence to the distinctions within the "Five Cardinal Relationships" facilitate harmonious operations within traditional society (Qiu, 2013).

Ancient Chinese traditional society relied heavily on Confucianism to regulate behavior, with the "Five Cardinal Relationships" being a pivotal aspect of this social governance. This system guided individuals in restraining their behaviors and desires to uphold social harmony. Adherence to these principles ensured that society functioned smoothly and cohesively.

 05-4506832 The emphasis on good social relations within the "Five Cardinal Relationships", such as the respectful dynamics between sovereign and minister, the filial piety practiced between fathers and children, the harmonious interactions of brotherhood, the balanced relationship between husband and wife, and the trust amongst friends, played a dual role. Not only did they cultivate a sense of peace and harmony within personal social circles, but they also contributed to maintaining a healthy and optimal physical as well as mental state. Furthermore, these positive relationships promoted social, cultural, and overall societal harmony and prosperity. The symbiosis of following these principles and fostering harmonious relations was considered integral for the holistic well-being and flourishing of individuals and society as a whole.

1.7.4 Public and Private

The interpretation of "public" (公) as outlined in the *Shuowen Jiezi · Radical Ba* 《说文解字·八部》 elucidates its essence as signifying fair distribution. This term is a combination of two pictograms, embodying "assembled meanings" (会意), akin to the composite structure of "Ba Si" (八厶). Here, "Ba" connotes deviation. Han Feizi, an influential ancient Chinese philosopher, expounded, "Deviation from private is public", indicating the shift from a self-centered orientation to a broader, communal perspective (Xu, 1981).

In this context, "Si" (厶) is an ancient representation of "private" (私). *Shuowen Jiezi · Radical Si* 《说文解字·厶部》 characterizes "Si" as representing something evil. Han Feizi further expounds that when Cang Jie, a legendary figure associated with the invention of Chinese characters, devised words, the intent was to secure personal benefit and pursue individual interests, encapsulated by the concept of "private" (Xu, 1981). This dichotomy between public and private is crucial for understanding the underlying intentions and implications of these terms in ancient Chinese culture.

In this thesis, the definitions of "public" (公) and "private" (私) will draw from explanations found in the *Shuowen Jiezi* and *Han Feizi*. According to *Shuowen Jiezi · Radical He* 《说文解字·禾部》, "private" (私) is a combination of signfic and phonetic parts, where "Si" (厶) serves as the sound symbol, and it is associated with



"He" (禾), signifying crop. Duan Yucai's annotation sheds light on the meaning of "private" (私), highlighting that when a paddy field (禾田) has a landlord, it becomes privatized. The term "Si" (厶) in "private" (私) is borrowed from the term "public" (公), equating "He" (禾) and "Si" (厶) to convey the concept of private land. Originating from Cang Jie's word creation, "private" signifies actions for one's own benefit, emphasizing personal pursuits, distinct from public interests. *Han Feizi · Wu Du* 《韩非子·五蠹》 provides historical context, stating that in ancient times, Cang Jie coined the term "private" to describe those who surrounded him. Conversely, "public" refers to the opposite. Han Feizi acknowledges the clear distinction between public and private interests, refuting the misconception that they are synonymous. He advocates cultivating benevolence and scholarly familiarity as a way to plan for oneself, emphasizing the value of understanding these concepts for personal growth (Xu, 1981; Han, 2015).

Indeed, the interpretations of "public" and "private" derived from the mentioned literature elucidate a fundamental distinction. "Public" embodies connotations of fairness and something beyond individual possession, highlighting a sense of collective benefit and equitable distribution. On the other hand, "private" signifies actions oriented towards personal advantage, encompassing pursuits for individual benefit, encompassing activities driven by personal interests and property ownership.

This clear opposition between "public" and "private" lays a solid foundation for the research pursued by this thesis, emphasizing the dialectical nature of these two stances. It



provides a robust framework for analyzing and understanding the implications, dynamics, and societal influence associated with these contrasting concepts. This dialectical approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of their interplay, impact, and the broader implications they hold within various contexts, contributing to a more nuanced and insightful study.

1.7.5 Righteousness and Profit

The concepts of "righteousness" (义) and "profit" (利) indeed present a significant philosophical dilemma. Confucius, in *The Analects · Yang Huo* 《论语·阳货》, emphasizes the priority of righteousness, asserting that the superior person regards righteousness as paramount. This underscores the moral and ethical dimension that should guide actions and decisions.

Similarly, in *The Analects · Li Ren* 《论语·里仁》, Confucius emphasizes that constantly pursuing personal advantage leads to discontent and criticism. The focus on gain is deemed characteristic of a lesser individual, contrasting with the superior person whose mind is entrenched in righteousness.

However, *The Analects · Xian Wen* 《论语·宪问》 introduces a more complex perspective, suggesting that one who contemplates gain should also consider righteousness. This implies a potential integration of profit-seeking activities with moral considerations.

In *The Commentary of Zuo* 《春秋左传》, Confucius emphasizes the role of courtesy (礼) in promoting morality (道义), and how morality can generate benefits. This approach highlights the interconnectedness of righteousness, benefits, and societal harmony. Benefits, in this context, are seen as a product of morality and a means to ensure peace and stability within society.

These teachings present a nuanced understanding of the balance between personal gain and moral conduct. The tension between righteousness and profit is acknowledged, yet it's suggested that a virtuous approach to gain, anchored in moral principles, can lead to benefits that promote societal welfare and harmony, aligning with

 05- Confucian ideals of governance and ethical conduct.

The insights from the ancient teachings regarding "righteousness" and "profit" illuminate a nuanced relationship that isn't simply diametrically opposed. This intricacy warrants a thorough exploration in the context of this thesis. "Righteousness" and "profit" are not confined to discussions of morality and self-interest but extend to broader societal implications, influencing individuals, communities, and even nations in their pursuit of morality and interests.

"Righteousness" is a criterion vital for maintaining the harmonious development of society, falling within the domain of ethics. Individuals adhering to livelihoods in alignment with ethical values to attain benefits, meet basic life needs, and accumulate

wealth without succumbing to profit-driven desires or engaging in illicit activities is a manifestation of this ethical dimension. This approach can lead to an ideal scenario of moral cultivation while maintaining societal prosperity.

At the level of the relationship between "righteousness" and "profit", a judicious balance is crucial. Those in positions of power, when adept at weighing and situating righteousness and profit appropriately, can effectively conduct ideological construction that embodies both courtesy and righteousness for the populace. Moreover, fostering a social operating model that harmonizes righteousness and profit enables people to accrue benefits. Implementing this effective political strategy not only benefits the citizens but also contributes to the construction of a robust and morally upright society. The symbiosis of righteousness and profit, when strategically employed, can be a powerful force for societal well-being and advancement.

1.7.6 Benevolence and Destiny

Benevolence stands as a fundamental ethical precept championed by Confucianism. It embodies the quintessence of compassion and goodwill, representing the highest virtue and a societal aspiration within Confucian ideology (Chen, 2014). Benevolence encompasses both a disposition of kindness and an affectionate regard for others, constituting a core pillar of the Confucian ethical framework (Cai, 2009). In Confucian philosophy, benevolence constitutes the cornerstone of human relationships, encompassing the bond



between individuals and others. It embodies a profound, affectionate connection among two or more individuals, transcending the boundaries of parental ties. This love-based relationship is characterized by attributes of care, respect, and mutual regard (Chen, 2014). Benevolence extends beyond a fixed or confined scope and encompasses relationships with both humanity and the broader world, illustrating benevolence towards family, fellow individuals, and all things (Cai, 2009). The fusion of benevolence and love epitomizes the fundamental essence of benevolence, a concept strongly endorsed by Confucianism (Wang, 2009). This alignment is evident in the interpretation of benevolence, where Confucius, as documented in *The Analects*, succinctly conveyed that benevolence is synonymous with loving others (Ruan, He, Xing, 1982; Translated by A. Charles Muller). This demonstrates the quintessence of benevolence as a love-oriented principle, reflecting the core tenets of



05- caring and showing compassion to others.

The interpretation of destiny within Confucian philosophy holds multifaceted meanings, one of which emphasizes its connotation as an "objective necessity not subject to man's will" (Chang, Jin, 2013). Confucius' concept of destiny differs from the heavenly destiny prevalent in the Yin and Zhou Dynasties, portraying it as an unalterable phenomenon beyond the influence of both humans and deities (Chang, Jin, 2013). Such immutable destinies find expression in *The Analects*, as evidenced by various passages. For instance, Yan Yuan conveys a sentiment of destiny regarding human relationships, highlighting the belief in fate governing life and death and the distribution of wealth and honor (Ruan, He, Xing, 1982; Translated by A. Charles Muller). Confucius himself acknowledged the role of fate in the functioning of the Way (Dao) and acknowledged the





limitations one faces in altering destiny (Ruan, He, Xing, 1982; Translated by A. Charles Muller). Yao Yue's statement reinforces the significance of understanding destiny, propriety, and words to be regarded as a noble individual, further underlining the importance and acceptance of destiny within Confucian teachings (Ruan, He, Xing, 1982; Translated by A. Charles Muller). The term destiny of heaven encompasses the concept of "objective inevitability of change that cannot be predetermined by human beings", encompassing both favorable and unfavorable circumstances, life events like birth, aging, illness, and death, as well as shifts in political regimes (Chang, Jin, 2013).

Confucianism utilizes the fundamental moral concept of "loving others" to influence its audience, aiming to cultivate collective consciousness and foster the acceptance of benevolent ideals. This, in turn, contributes to the stable and harmonious development of society and the nation as a whole. On the other hand, the concept of destiny encompasses not only the understanding that the world must adhere to the objective inevitabilities of natural laws but also extends to aspects such as lifespan, lot, and the destiny of heaven.

1.8 Study Limitations

The study limitations within this thesis pertain to the contextual boundaries of the analyzed text. Spanning from the reign of Emperor Jiajing (嘉靖) to the era of Emperor Chongzhen (崇禎) in the late Ming Dynasty, this period encapsulates several decades.



The methodology employed in this thesis involves a confluence of literature and historical analysis intertwined with the textual subject. Throughout the research process, *Er Pai* serves as a representative illustration for delving into the cultural dimensions of scholars and merchants, as well as the societal ethics prevalent during the late Ming Dynasty.

Given the extensive volume of literature documenting or investigating the Ming Dynasty's history, it is apprehended that incorporating a multitude of works into this thesis may prove challenging. Consequently, this may result in a macroscopic shortfall in portraying the true essence of scholars-merchants culture and social morality against the historical backdrop of the late Ming Dynasty. However, constrained by the research scope, the analysis is confined to an examination of business-related chapters within *Er Pai*, amalgamated with information gleaned from existing historical literature. This approach affords insight into the representation of scholars-merchants culture and social morality as depicted within the text.

In the event that scholars identify deficiencies within this research, scholars vested in this domain are encouraged to address these gaps in future investigations.

1.9 Importance of Research

After an extended evolution, the novel has transitioned from colloquial anecdotes and hearsay to a literary form capable of conveying truths and imparting education to the

common populace. The promotion of moral values, such as the punishment of malevolence and the advocacy of virtue and retribution, holds significant importance within the narrative of the novel. While the plot is articulated in a storytelling format, vernacular short novels serve the dual purpose of entertaining the public and, beneath the surface, propagating ideologies and cultures deserving of dissemination. Through this literary medium, readers are provided an opportunity for relaxation and amusement while simultaneously being exposed to values that prompt reflection upon their own conduct. This guides the formulation of sound moral concepts and assists readers in navigating the complexities of life when feeling perplexed or having lost direction.

The rationale behind selecting *Er Pai* as the focal point of this thesis lies in the profound depiction of life during the Ming Dynasty by the author. The characters are imbued with diversity and richness. In addition to examining the progression of a commercialized society during the late Ming Dynasty from an official historical vantage point, *Er Pai* serves as an entry point for scrutinizing the operational dynamics of the entire societal framework through the lens of ordinary individuals within the novel. This thesis endeavors to investigate the relationship between the cultural expressions resulting from the interplay of characters within the purview of this research and the society of that era.

Within *Er Pai*, particularly in the chapters related to commerce, the depictions of interactions between scholars and the merchant class are meticulously detailed. Concurrently, it offers insights into the living conditions of individuals across diverse strata of society during the late Ming era when Wang Yangming's "Xin Xue" and commercial

activities were gaining prominence and interest was being highly valued. Through various characters in the story, we can discern the public's attitudes towards scholars-merchants, thereby illuminating the standing and treatment of this emerging class in society. The objective is to elucidate the form of scholars-merchants culture prevalent in *Er Pai*. The social morality of the late Ming Dynasty can be explored through the lens of interactions between scholars and merchants in the novel, as well as their individual ideologies concerning public welfare, private interests, righteousness, profit, and other values. This exploration aims to ascertain whether the two aspects coexist in a harmonious and balanced state or adopt a conflicting and discordant stance. These considerations underpin the thesis's worthiness in delving into the intricacies of scholars-merchants culture and social morality during the late Ming Dynasty.

1.10 Summary

The evolution of commercial culture during the late Ming Dynasty had a profound impact on societal paradigms concerning profit. Individuals across all societal strata embraced ideological concepts that emphasized profit, with some scholars displaying astute awareness of this reality. They engaged in commercial endeavors seeking profit, aspiring to construct a lifestyle of leisure and seclusion. This pursuit alleviated the disillusionment stemming from the seemingly hopeless career prospects associated with the imperial examination system. Liberated from the demands of practical existence, they distanced

themselves from worldly affairs, endeavoring to establish a cultured and refined living environment.

Simultaneously, merchants nurtured their progeny to enter scholarly pursuits, aspiring to enhance social standing and family reputation. The convergence of these disparate social classes engendered an interpenetration of their respective cultures, giving rise to the emergence of scholars-merchants culture. Moreover, the positions of both parties were not in opposition, seeking to derive mutual benefits. The shifting societal milieu and trends exerted an influence on the established ideological framework of traditional society. The conventional ethical structure, represented by the Five Cardinal Relationships, underwent transformation with the ascendancy of the Simin Theory. Concepts encompassing public interest, private concerns, righteousness, and profit gradually delineated the social morality prevailing during the late Ming Dynasty.

The amalgamation of scholars and merchants cultures altered the ethical fabric of the Five Cardinal Relationships, birthing a moral consciousness where the pursuit of self-interest often eclipsed ethical considerations. The burgeoning commerce permeated society with a utilitarian ethos, saturating various facets of life, from fulfilling basic needs to pursuing material comforts or resolving life's challenges. Money emerged as a vital tool for survival, fulfilling pressing needs under the exigencies of reality. The allure of money became even more enticing as it addressed urgent needs, reflecting an intrinsic aspect of human nature—the ceaseless pursuit of desires.

While this desire-driven pursuit impelled people to seek monetary gains, often sidelining or challenging traditional ethical concepts, it is an expected outcome. The norms of social ethics emanate from the persistent influence of normative behaviors on individual and collective consciousness. People may exhibit reverence for traditional ethics in spirit, yet their lives unfold within the harsh reality of society, necessitating financial means to secure basic necessities like clothing, food, shelter, and transportation. Even the sustenance of life hinges on financial support. Only with abundant funds and secure living conditions can one accommodate a richness of spiritual thought.

Thus, the influence of a utilitarian society on social morality cannot be discounted. In situations where people adhere to the norms of traditional ethical concepts but face challenges in fulfilling daily basic needs or desires, ethical and moral constraints may appear weakened, especially when life becomes arduous or psychological equilibrium is disrupted. Through the narrative of *Er Pai*, as observed in the interactions between scholars and merchants and the activities and psychological portrayals of the protagonists and other characters, the impact on social morality is elucidated. This aids in achieving the envisioned objectives of this thesis, utilizing *Er Pai* to explore the culture of scholars-merchants and the prevailing social morality during the late Ming Dynasty.

The forthcoming chapter will meticulously delve into the intricacies of the literature review. It will encompass an extensive array of sources including monographs, master's degree theses, doctoral dissertations, and journal articles pertinent to this research. This comprehensive review will serve as the foundation for the subsequent analytical phase,

facilitating the organization and in-depth analysis of information and details, aligning with the research focus of this thesis based on prior scholarly investigations.