

The Long Shirt and Fennel Bean: The Artistic Charm of the Detail Portrayal in “Kong Yiji”

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Abstract

A favourite literary work of Lu Xun, *Kong Yiji* has received much attention over the years. The novel profoundly depicts and presents the miserable, embarrassed life and mental state of an old-fashioned Chinese intellectual, further criticizes the traditional Chinese feudal rituals in a scathing manner. As two crucial symbols in *Kong Yiji*, the “long shirts” and the “fennel beans” contain a thought-provoking artistic appeal. The former represents Kong Yiji’s shell, his identity, the basis on which he asserted his status and established his life, his last link to the declining imperial examinations and the eight-legged essay. The latter represents his soul and symbolises his spiritual identity. His goodwill towards those around him was not recognised, and the old culture he upheld, like his own, had no outlet in the real world. The details of the “long shirts” and the “fennel beans” represent the double crisis and dilemma Kong Yiji faced in both reality and spirituality. This article will reveal the complexity of characterisation in *Kong Yiji* through the detail portrayal of the novel.

Keywords

Kong Yiji, Lu Xun, Detail Portrayal, Artistic Charm

1. Introduction

Lu Xun was born into a bureaucratic landlord’s family in Shaoxing, Zhejiang in 1881. However, at the age of 13, his grandfather, who had previously worked as an official, was imprisoned for some reason. Afterwards, his father fell ill for a long time and eventually died, causing the family to rapidly decline. The changes in the family had a profound impact on the young Lu Xun. The changes in his family and his life experiences after the changes also brought Lu Xun closer to the lower class from his youth. His grandmother’s family lived in the country-

side, which gave him the opportunity to come into contact and understand the lives of farmers. Especially before and after his grandfather's imprisonment, he had to seek refuge with relatives in the countryside and lived there for a long time. There, he became friends with the children from the countryside, caring and loving each other. These experiences had focused his attention on the broader subject area of the lowest class of society, hoping to reflect the suffering of unfortunate people in a pathological society by describing their daily life and mental state, in order to attract attention to treatment and rescue. For this purpose, he created classic images such as Kong Yiji and Sister Xianglin.

Kong Yiji was first published in "New Youth" in April 1919. This novel tells the story of Kong Yiji, who did not pass the exam of literati and lacked practical skills to make a living, indulging in pedantic "knowledge" such as "there are four ways to write Hui characters". He lost his dignity as a human being and became the object of ridicule in the Xianheng Hotel. Later, he was broken in leg due to stealing a book, leading to a story of his downfall to death.

Lu Xun once said, "Literature and art are the flames of the national spirit, and also the lights guiding the future of the national spirit (Lu, 2019a)." He advocated that literature and art must be able to directly face social reality and promote social progress. Therefore, most of Lu Xun's novels have a strong tendency towards realistic care, deeply depicting and presenting the spiritual state of Chinese people, and urging readers to reflect on the root cause of the decline of national spirit, and further criticizing the traditional feudal ethics of China in the strictest possible way.

The novel was published on the eve of the May Fourth Movement, and the wave of the New Culture Movement's "overthrow of the Kong family store" swept across the country. Feudal orthodoxy was fiercely criticized, and a group of old intellectuals were forced to move forward by the wheel of history. The separation of tradition and modernity, history and the present, made it impossible for them to reconcile the contradiction between their inner life and external environment, and could only lead to their tragic ending.

Although the plot of "Kong Yiji" is simple, it has profound ideological connotations and artistic charm. While expressing Kong Yiji's inner world, it also reflects the "warmth and coldness" of society. It not only exposes the darkness of feudal society, but also portrays people's spiritual state; It not only has a fresh and elegant literary style, but also deeply reflects various social problems and the complexity of human nature at that time, allowing readers to not only enjoy the beauty of literature but also feel the profound life philosophy contained in the work during the reading process.

In recent years, *Kong Yiji* has once again become the focus of people's attention, causing widespread discussion and reflection, leading to the emergence of the "Kong Yiji phenomenon", which refers to literary works, film and television works, music works, and other phenomena with the theme of "Kong Yiji". When searching under the theme of "Lu Xun" in CNKI database, the total number of

papers is 54,306. When searching under the theme of “Kong Yiji”, the total number is 2515.

The current research mainly includes the following two aspects: firstly, research on the author himself; secondly, research on the novel of *Kong Yiji*. It can be further divided into the following modules: Some researches are on the textual form of *Kong Yiji* (Liu, 2022). They thought that the textual form of “Kong Yiji” is an organic device that embeds the external life information fragments of “drinkers” and “Kong Yiji” into the internal life information of “young people”. The “little man” is the witness, while the “drinker” represents the general society, while the “Kong Yiji” symbolizes the bitter people. Most of the general society is also bitter people, and the bitter people are difficult for the bitter people. The narrative text structure shows the balance and rigidity of the cold and thin personality of the drinker, while the pure scene description expresses Kong Yiji’s desolation. The author believes that Lu Xun conveyed the meaning of “the general society’s coldness towards the bitter people” through the text form, When it has the positive function of allegorical expression, it also has the negative function of vague and complex spiritual conflicts, resulting in a rigid understanding of the human nature of the drinker and the failure of irony. Some researches are on the tragic fate of *Kong Yiji* (Wang, 2014). The tragic fate of *Kong Yiji* is either due to the social environment such as the feudal culture, feudal education research, the imperial examination system etc. or due to self reasons such as being gluttonous and lazy, conservative thinking, being pedantic etc. Some researches are on the sociological and cultural influences (He, 2016). This novel deeply exposes the poisoning of the imperial examination system on the spirit of intellectuals at that time and the essence of the feudal system’s “cannibalism”, which has strong anti feudal significance. *Kong Yiji* also tells us that the environment creates people, and in a hierarchical order, the vitality, enthusiasm, and compassion of the people are stifled, becoming numb, selfish, and indifferent. Some researches are on the comparison of translations of *Kong Yiji* (Zhu, 2020). The advantages and disadvantages of different versions are studied. Most of these researches focuses on the teaching strategies of *Kong Yiji*, such as from the perspective of questioning strategy to explore new teaching method (Yang, 2004), or from the perspective of text interpretation, analysis of teaching points, and teaching strategies to improve the teaching effect (Bao & Guo, 2023), especially the design of teaching framework structure.

There are very few literature exploring the literary nature of *Kong Yiji* and there is a suspicion of deviation and excessive analysis of ideas to some extent. They either study the folk customs of Shaoxing City and Lu Xun’s local complex (Pan, 2021), analyze the public opinion field in *Kong Yiji* (Zhang, 2022), or explore the friction and collision of several identities in the Xianheng Hotel (Liu & Yu, 2022), and come to the conclusion that “bitter people persecute bitter people”.

This paper takes a different approach, starting from the novel’s scenes, dia-

logues, and character descriptions, to provide a more distinctive perspective for the study of *Kong Yiji*.

2. The Long Shirt and Kong Yiji's Identity Identification

The long shirt was not only a symbol of Kong Yiji's identity as a literati, but also a concentrated representative of his status and resume in this society. It was his last connection with the already declining imperial examination and eight-part essay, and his protective color. At the same time, when it appeared in a group of short-clothing gangs, it was so out of place that it was collectively resisted and ridiculed by surrounding manual workers. The strong contrast between Kong Yiji's "self view" and "other view", as well as his decline and embarrassment in social status, was reflected in this long shirt, which could be described as a stroke of genius.

2.1. Kong Yiji's Cultural Identity

At the beginning, the novel introduces the layout of the Xianheng Hotel, which features a large counter in the shape of a ruler on the street, with hot water ready to warm the wine at any time. It introduces two main types of customers: "long-shirt" and "short-shirt gang". The short-shirt gang was often consisted of workers, spending four wen copper coins to buy a bowl of wine or an extra wen to buy alcoholic beverages. They can only "stand one by one outside the cabinet", while those wearing the long-shirt "stroll into the house next to the store, asks for wine and vegetables, and slowly sits and drinks". The "long shirt" was a unique symbol of intellectuals in the old society. In the old days, the intellectual's status was high and they had the corresponding economic strength to sit leisurely in the shop and eat and drink. For the convenience of production and labor, the working people usually only wear short-clothes, and naturally could not afford to sit inside and drink. They could only gather outside the counter to drink and chat. However, the protagonist of the novel, Kong Yiji, in the impression of the young man in charge of warming the wine, "I", was "the only person standing drinking and wearing a long shirt". Wearing a long shirt, but he could only stand, and was the only one who did so. His clothing and behavior were out of place with the people around him. In the eyes of ordinary people, he sat like sitting on pins and needles, but Kong Yiji did not think so. Even though he became the subject of ridicule, he still refused to take off his long shirt.

As for the reason why Kong Yiji refused to take off his long shirt, it is inevitable to talk about Kong Yiji's cultural identity. According to recollection of "I", he was a student before, but eventually did not enter the prefectural school. He was a person who was failed in the imperial examination and was also gluttonous and lazy. Kong Yiji never gave up his status as a literati, even though this status could no longer bring him glory. His various behaviors also revealed his sourness as a frustrated literati. When the drinker questioned Kong Yiji about stealing books from the He's family, he retorted, "Qie (Another word whose meaning

is close to stealing in Chinese) books cannot be considered stealing...Qie books!...can it be considered stealing for a literati?" What he wanted to express was: 1) he admitted he had stolen books from the He's family; 2) because he was a literati, stealing books was justified. One of the definitions of the word "steal" in the dictionary is to secretly take others property. The definition of the word "Qie" is similar to it, and nowadays it is often used in combination with "steal". However, "Qie" in ancient Chinese also means "secretly, privately" and "Take something that is not one's own, receive something inappropriate". For example, a story in the "Historical Records·Biography of Sun Tzu and Wu Qi" told that the envoy of the state of Qi was surprised by Sun Bin's talent, so he secretly brought him to the state of Qi. Therefore, "Qie Shu" can be thought as reading others' books without permission, which is obviously different with stealing books. Stealing books is an illegal act aimed at encroaching on the property of others, and unauthorized reading of others' books (Qie Shu) does not cause property damage to the book owner. The books are precious in ancient times, and the only existing copy was more difficult to find. As a failed literati, Kong Yiji's desired to peek at the collection of books in his employer's house due to his thirst for knowledge was also reasonable

However, in the face of the drinker's questioning, Kong Yiji's defense was clearly pale and powerless. "His face turned red, and the blue veins on his forehead broke out" further exposing the clumsiness of the impoverished literati. Words such as "a gentleman is always poor" and "zhehu" were even more liking a chicken to talk with a duck to the short-cloth gang standing outside the counter drinking alcohol. Workers who had not receiving any school education could not understand the meaning of the words, nor could they empathize with his helplessness. They only found his appearance of being forced to the end amusing.

When Kong Yiji argued for himself, he mentioned that "a gentleman is always poor" and compared himself to a "gentleman", drawing a clear line between himself and the short-cloth gang standing around drinking alcohol. Someone made fun of Kong Yiji's newly added scar on his face, but he didn't respond and only spoke to the young man in the cabinet. Faced with the mockery of the short-cloth gang, Kong Yiji also showed an evasive attitude and disdained talking to them. This was a means for Kong Yiji to show his identity to others. The phrase "arrange" (Pai) in "then arrange nine wen of big money" is the key word of the sentence. There are many words that can replace the role of "arrange" in this sentence, such as "throw" or "release", but none of them are as vivid as "arrange". The act of arranging money is slow and solemn. It is like that one is not sure if he/she has enough money, so he/she need to line it up and count it carefully. It's not like spending a lot of money, being too lazy to study, or being obscene or trivial, with the intention of fooling others. Kong Yiji listed the money one by one and declared in a polite and serious way that he was a literati, different from the people around him. At the same time, the act of "arrange" was

straightforward and upright, without any hesitation from the people around him. Kong Yiji used this to prove that the money for alcohol was not coming from an improper source.

2.2. Kong Yiji's Social Identity

Kong Yiji considered himself a literati and a gentleman, but the masses led by "I" could only see that he was living in poverty and was "about to beg for food". He used to have a decent job, but unfortunately, he was gluttonous and lazy, so no one asked him for money anymore. Life was difficult, so he was inevitable to do some "stealing" by chance in order to survive. In the eyes of the masses, Kong Yiji was clumsy, funny, and amusing, which was the source of joy. Words such as "guffaw" and "making people happy" show that Kong Yiji had lost his independent value as a "person" and had not received respect as an "independent individual". In people's minds, he was dispensable, his existence was just a tonic in people's monotonous lives, and even his misfortune was just a conversation piece in others' mouths.

The long shirt on Kong Yiji's body was "dirty and torn", "it seems like it hasn't been patched or washed for more than ten years". There was no repair, no washing, probably no money to repair, and there was no second long shirt to change, so after years, it became a tattered piece of clothing. The tattered long shirt on this extend no longer added luster to Kong Yiji's identity, but instead became a symbol of sloppy and down and out. Faced with ridicule and incomprehension from others, Kong Yiji still wore this dirty and torn long shirt. In his heart, the long shirt as a symbol of literati status far exceeded its actual effectiveness in use. Kong Yiji's quote of "a gentleman's steadfastness in poverty" comes from the "Analects of Confucius: Wei Linggong" (Yang, 2017), where "steadfastness in poverty" refers to not changing one's moral character by living in poverty. This is Confucius' demand for a righteous gentleman and a moral constraint that can only be achieved in extremely ideal environments. Kong Yiji put it into practice on a practical level, adhering to the belief that no matter how dirty or torn the long shirt is, it is also a long shirt, and even the most down and out literati is also an upright literati. These believes made him become the only person and awkward person who drifted away from the "long shirt customer" and "short shirt gang".

Kong Yiji fell into such a predicament, but still retained his long nails, which he could use to dip his nails in wine and write on the counter. In his concept, it was not shameful for a literati to be "absent from work", but to be willing to be enslaved for the sake of livelihood was what made him ashamed. Long nails were not conducive to labor, which was another sign of the literati of the old era. He refused to cut off his long nails and did not want to deviate from the literati's reserve, which was closely related to his identity: Kong Yiji's view of his position in society was in stark contrast to what others believed.

One day, about two or three days before the Mid Autumn Festival, the shop-keeper was slowly checking out and taking down the powder board. Suddenly,

he said, “Kong Yiji hasn’t come for a long time. He still owes nineteen dollars!” “I realized he hasn’t come for a long time. A drinker said, “How did he come?...his legs were broken ‘The shopkeeper said, Oh!” “He always steals. This time, he lost his senses and actually stole into Ding Ju’s house. Could his family be stolen? ‘What happened later?’ ‘What happened?’ First, he wrote the confession document, then he was beaten for most of the night, and then his legs were broken. ‘Later?’ Later, his legs were broken. ‘What happened to the discount?’ What?... Who knows? Maybe he is dead.” (Lu, 2005a) The shopkeeper no longer asked, still slowly calculating his accounts.

The shopkeeper and drinkers thought Kong Yiji’s legs were broken as a “play”, and no one really cared about Kong Yiji’s life and death. One kept asking, as if listening to an interesting story, without showing any sympathy for the tragic experiences of people who had known each other for a long time, while the other answered with massive understatement about Kong Yiji’s whereabouts, “Who knows? Maybe he’s dead”, and condemning the victim from a height to “faint”, “Could his family be stolen?” to show his sobriety. So Kong Yiji’s misfortune, which was full of smell of blood, was dissolved in the merciless voices of these two spectators.

As a vested interest in the imperial examination, Ding (A champion in an imperial examination), who hold a high position and power, should have a deep understanding of the hardships of the imperial examination process. However, he seriously lacked empathy and not only failed to do good to Kong Yij, but also cruelly tortured Kong Yij. Regardless of whether Kong Yiji actually stole something from his family, the indiscriminate practice of lynching by Ding was obviously unfair, but in the era of “only allowing state officials to set fire”, it was impossible to be tried.

Although Xianheng Hotel is small, it is a microcosm of a society full of falsehood and indifference, with a serious lack of trust between people. Short-cloth gang should “watch with their own eyes as the yellow wine is scooped out of the jar, see if there is water in the bottom of the pot, and then put the pot in hot water, then rest assured”. On the one hand, it indicated that short-cloth gang could not tolerate a shortage of yellow wine; on the other hand, it indicated that the situation where the shopkeeper allowed the young hotel staff to plot water has occurred from time to time, causing both parties to lose basic trust in each other and constantly monitor and guard against each other. It is natural for customers to spend money on enjoying goods. But in the eyes of the shopkeeper and the young staff, it had become “easy to talk, but nagging and entangled”, which showed that people were indifferent and deceitful.

So in the social model that takes the Xianheng Hotel as the narrative scene, the “cold scrutiny” people had towards Kong Yiji’s misfortune appeared very normal. In order to satisfy their desire to “watch the excitement”, the masses repeatedly uncovered Kong Yiji’s scars, exposing him with a “decadent and restless appearance, with a layer of gray on his face”. Only then did they burst out laughing with satisfaction.

Kong Yiji's life was a failure, so as a person, the most valuable and only thing left was self-esteem. As the old saying goes, "A scholar can be killed, but not humiliated (Yang, 2023)." But at the Xianheng Hotel, all he encountered were provocations and mockery from others. People ignored his dignity and talked recklessly about his sadness. What they often said was: "Kong Yiji, you have added new scars to your face", "Kong Yiji, do you really know how to read", "Why can't you even get half a scholar?" Even when Kong Yiji broke his legs, they surrounded him and made fun of him. Finally, they watched Kong Yiji "sat and walked slowly with his hands amidst the laughter of others".

It wasn't until more than twenty years later that "'I' (The young staff) finally haven't seen Kong Yiji—he maybe indeed die." The young staff did not carefully verify, but only gave a vague conclusion, which coincided with others attitude towards Kong Yiji. "Kong Yiji is so cheerful, but without him, others would have lived like this (Lu, 2005a)." Whether he was life or death, actually no one cared.

The author proposed in his essay "Re-discussion of the fall of Lei Feng Pagoda" that "tragedy destroys the valuable things in life for people to see" (Lu, 2019b). Kong Yiji's character is better than others and he never fell behind with his beer-money. Without faith, one cannot stand firm. Although Kong Yiji lived in poverty, he definitely paid off his debts within a month. It was his bottom line as a literati and an important capital for his independence from the short-cloth gang. But after being broken legs by Ding, Kong Yiji's only pride no longer existed. When the shopkeeper smiled at him as usual and said, "Kong Yiji, did you steal again." He no longer argued, but only said, "Don't make fun of me!" His attitude was completely different from before, and his righteousness changed from strict to hesitant, with a slightly weaker tone. Previously, one could only see the scars on his face, but now his legs was broken and become disabled. Kong Yiji, who "walked" with his bare hands, no longer had his long shirt, but "wore a torn jacket". If Kong Yiji, whose legs had not been broken, could still distinguish himself from the "vulgar" laborers through clothing and actions such as a "long shirt", numb himself, and preserve his final dignity, then at this moment, Kong Yiji, who "wears a torn jacket", could be said to have not any dignity. He was not only teased by the short-cloth gang, but also severely slap in the face by Ding, who was thought by Kong Yiji to have the same social background. Ding directly "broke his leg". This is a dual blow both mentally and physically, making him completely lose the basis for his dependence in this society. The long shirt he took off indicated that he had given up his identity as a literati. Before his legs were broken, although Kong Yiji was poor, his spiritual world was abundant, and he could still use "the gentleman's steadfastness in poverty" as a consolation. But after the event of "stealing the books of Ding" and he was broken the legs, he became a walking corpse.

3. The "Fennel Bean" and Spiritual Identity of Kong Yiji

The introduction of the image of "fennel bean" adds complexity and multiplicity

to the narrative of the entire story. It was a small prop used by the kind-hearted Kong Yiji to tease children and gained favor. However, when he tried to approach the narrator and showcased old knowledge and culture through the “four ways of writing in the Chinese word ‘Hui’”, he was met with indifference and white eyes. Finally, he “showed a very regretful look”. On the surface, Kong Yiji regretted the hotel staff’s unwillingness to learn knowledge, while on another level, the author and readers shared the regret that Kong Yiji had been deeply influenced by the imperial examination culture and was completely useless. If the “long shirt” was the outer shell of Kong Yiji, then the “fennel bean” was Kong Yiji’s personality and soul, just like encountering obstacles in real life, having no way out.

3.1. Kong Yiji’s Moral Spirit

Even if Kong Yiji fell to the point of begging, he was unwilling to engage in low-end labor to make a living. Didn’t the Sage also said that gentlemen should be content with poverty? But Kong Yiji’s poverty was for himself, and he never defaulted when standing among the poor. He adhered to the bottom line of being a righteous person and could be poor, but he cannot do unethical things. When others provoked him to steal books from the He’s family, he opened his eyes wide and argued, “How can you be so impudent...” The word “steal” is vulgar. He refused to accept others using vulgar “steal” to describe a literati like him. The chewing upon a subject of “Qie” and “stealing” clearly demonstrated Kong Yiji’s likes and dislikes for the meaning and color of words, as well as his definition of moral standards.

Kong Yiji was not liked by adults, but he was very popular with children. Only the children were willing to surround Kong Yiji, and at that time, he gave each child an fennel bean. The children refused to leave after finishing the fennel beans and eagerly looked at Kong Yiji, hoping that he could give more. But a plate of fennel beans worth a penny was a food that poor Kong Yiji needed to make up his mind to purchase, and could not be distributed to children for another round. He only had to “spread his five fingers to cover the plate” and coaxed the children away.

The world of children is spotless, they have not been harmed by harmful influence of elders, nor have they inherited the views of their ancestors on good and evil. Therefore, the children did not laugh at Kong Yiji’s sourness, but were willing to approach this dirty, messy, strange mouthed person who was excluded by the mainstream world.

Kong Yiji was deeply influenced by the moral ideas he upheld, as evidenced by his attitude towards the people around him. The shopkeeper often mixed water into the wine pot, so the short-cloth gang had to supervise the young man until they confirmed that there was no water mixed before they were satisfied. Otherwise, they would nag and make people feel embarrassed, but Kong Yiji did not do so. Compared with the meticulous short-cloth gang, he never embarrassed

others, even if they did things that harmed his interests. When the short-cloth gang who he disdained mocked him, he at most defended himself, but always maintained the cultivation of an intellectual and did not insult or retaliate against others. When a group of children surrounded him, he did not drive them away, but patiently distributed limited fennel beans to them. Although the small dish of alcoholic beverages was not easy for him, he was not very stingy just because fennel beans were worth a penny. From Kong Yiji's way of dealing with people, it could be seen that there is a rare tolerance and propriety in the under-privileged, and such a character is extremely commendable.

3.2. Kong Yiji's Cultural Spirit

Kong Yiji is not his real name, but his surname is Kong, so someone took the nickname for him from the obscure and difficult to understand sentence "Lord Kong Yiji" on the calligraphy-practice paper (Lu, 2005a). Confucius, the founder of the Confucian school, was an ancient scholar who shared the same lineage as Kong Yiji, and Kong Yiji had received Confucian education for the imperial examination since he was a child. Kong Yiji was undoubtedly the inheritor of Confucianism, as he showcased the inheritance concepts of the Confucian school in all his behaviors, and his repeated words were "archaisms: Zhi Hu Zhe Ye".

Confucianism has a history over two thousand years and had been utilized by multiple generations of monarchs and Confucius' core ideas was changed according to their intentions, in order to regulate and constrain social order, which had already violated the original intention of "benevolence (Ren)". "Ren 'means' love" (Mencius, 2017a), which means that only when a monarch practices benevolence can he have the ability to rule the country. But feudal centralization often distorted Confucianism and used high-pressure methods to rule the people, which ultimately only made the people suffer unbearable and unable to make a living.

In the old society, studying was often a right for the children of wealthy families, and it was also the only way for the poor to change destiny. Whenever the masses talked about Ding (The champion in imperial examinations), they all hold great respect, indicating that he owned high prestige. But when Ding tortured Kong Yiji, he showed no mercy. Ding was able to achieve success and fame through the imperial examination system, but he inherited none of the essence of Confucianism advocated by the imperial examination. He already held a high position, but in the face of Kong Yiji, who was at a disadvantage and had made mistakes, he lacked tolerance and compassion. Instead, he hit Kong Yiji hard, which meant he was far from the true culture of Confucianism.

Kong Yiji always followed the concept of "benevolence" and was a typical representative of the spirit of literati. Confucius believed that "benevolence" is not bestowed by others or the outside world, but rather that no matter what kind of environment or position a person is in, they must implement the "benevo-

lence” path without hesitation (Mencius, 2017b). Kong Yiji, as an unsuccessful scholar, had nowhere to showcase his talents and was not recognized in daily life. He was even ridiculed and insulted, and had no dignity to speak of. But he did not transmit the malicious intent he received to others, but instead transformed it into goodwill, to understand and tolerate. Therefore, Kong Yiji truly practiced the true path of “benevolence”.

3.3. Kong Yiji’s Era Spirit

The era of Kong Yiji was the end of the late Qing Dynasty’s destiny. Around the Wuxu Reform, the nation was in a period of crisis, and the country was also in turmoil. In 1905, the imperial examination system was officially abolished, and the only way for traditional scholars to enter politics as officials was blocked. The knowledge system that they had learned for many years, mainly based on the eight-part essay, also lost its practical effectiveness, and they themselves became victims of the imperial examination system.

Kong Yiji was ostracized by others at the Xianheng Hotel. No one wanted to talk to him. Therefore, he wanted to talk to “I (Yong staff)” who was also a peripheral person. But when Kong Yiji sincerely wanted to teach “I” how to read the word “Hui”, “I” thought, “Do beggars deserve to be tested on ‘me’?” “I” “turned back and ignored him no longer”, followed by “lazily answering him”, and finally, “I” became more impatient and walked away with my mouth open (Lu, 2005a). “I” was only in my teens, at a pure and innocent age. In theory, “I” should not have such great malice towards an embarrassed and pitiful person. However, at the influence of people around “me”, even if “I” was young, “I” could vaguely know that Kong Yiji, who was wearing a long shirt but only standing and drinking, was not a respectable person. So even if “I” was a marginalized person at Xianheng Hotel, just like Kong Yiji, “I” still looked down on Kong Yiji (Lu, 2005a).

The viewpoints of “I” to Kong Yiji was exactly the same as that of the new generation. When Kong Yiji arrived, “I” could feel a rare sense of relief. The shopkeeper wouldn’t scold “I” even if “I” double up with laughter at this time. But psychologically, “I” still refused to approach him and get to know him. Such contradictory psychological activities made “me” unwilling to come into contact with the four ways of writing the word “Hui” taught by Kong Yiji, and even disdain to listen to him. When Kong Yiji advised “me” to learn how to write, he warned “me” that “I” would use it when I became a shopkeeper in the future. “I” thought contemptuously, “I” am still far from the shopkeeper’s level, and the shopkeeper does not include fennel beans in the account. My impatient attitude towards knowledge was a blow to Kong Yiji and also a blow to the old culture. As a new generation, “I” had great potential, but when knowledge was right in front of “me”, “I” didn’t want to take a glance at it, and even looked at it with a utilitarian and superficial perspective: since being a shopkeeper could not use these things, why should “I” still learn?

Those who were hurt by the impact of new and old cultures were all losers who fallen off the imperial examination ladder. They could neither integrate into the new environment, nor change the current world. The outdated posture exposed in every movement and gesture would only lead to ridicule. Kong Yiji could not understand the disdainful attitude of others towards old culture, and others could not understand Kong Yiji's contradictory demeanor. He could only stand at a crossroads where new and old cultures, East and West cultures interweave.

4. On the Complexity of Kong Yiji from the Perspective of “Long Shirt” and “Fennel Bean”

4.1. Kong Yiji's Natural Personality

Kong Yiji's natural personality was fragmented and contradictory. His handwriting was very beautiful, but he always did it by fits and starts, and even disappeared within a few days when someone hired him to copy documents. He had no official position and his family was very poor, but he refused to give up his tattered long shirt and long nails to work hard to make a living. Everyone thought that he was doing theft, but his conduct in the store was the best and he never defaulted on alcohol payments. The strong conflict between natural personality and society was the root of the contradiction.

He used to be a scholar who had been studying hard for many years in a poor situation, but he could not like Ding who passed the provincial graduate and became the Champion to live a prosperous life. Instead, he was down and out that he was about to beg along the street. The long shirt represented both his identity as a cultural figure and his ideal of rapidly going up in the world. His self-esteem did not allow him to take off his long shirt until it was dirty and torn, unable to be mended or washed again. But the phrase “Why can't you even get half a first-degree scholar?” easily exposed Kong Yiji's scars. He didn't want to face his own incompetence, but the “decadent and uneasy” look on his face had already exposed his inferiority totally. He almost wanted to use his self honored identity as a “scholar” as a shield to resist the commotion of people around him in order to maintain his personality and dignity, but he still couldn't resist the tyranny of power. He could only “sit and walk slowly with this hand” amidst the laughter of others (Lu, 2005a).

Although Kong Yiji, like the short-cloth gang, could only stand and drink alcohol, and might even be in a much worse position than the short-cloth gang because the latter had a continuous and stable source of income, Kong Yiji looked down on them and was unwilling to get along with them and so started a fight against the short-cloth gang. But that is the unique, gentle and reserved resistance of scholars. All of his efforts were declared unsuccessful in the “archaism: zhi Hu zhe Ye”, and his blushing arguments were rewarded with repeated mockery from the shopkeeper and the drinkers.

Kong Yiji's frustration was mostly due to his lack of awareness of progress. It

was normal for candidates to fail the imperial examination. Those who failed have two options: one was to continue preparing for the imperial examination, and the other was to choose another way out. However, Kong Yiji chose the third path. The reason was that his aesthetic was excessively simplistic. He thought that there was only one way out in life, that is, to take the exam, and there was only one status in society was the most prestigious, i.e., to be a scholar. Imperial examination was the only ladder for a humble family to become a high-ranking official in ancient times. Those who climbed up can honor their ancestors, while those who fell from this ladder would always be the bottom of society. This was a wrong idea instilled in people in feudal society, and it was also the poison of the imperial examination system on people. However, in the time of Kong Yiji lived, imperial examination was repealed, he could not change his fate by this way, but he was not willing to make his living by labor. So his tragedy could not be avoided.

Kong Yiji's soul remained in the old era, but the old era was gone forever. His body was carried by the wheels of history into the new era, but his soul clearly couldn't keep up with the pace of his body, which led to absurd and unaware behaviors such as "long clothes", "nails", and "'Qie Shu' was not considered 'stealing'". Kong Yiji was a victim of the old era, and it was not uncommon for him to be a tragic laggard of the times.

4.2. Kong Yiji's Moral Personality

The author affirmed Kong Yiji's moral personality from the perspective of "I" as a young staff. Kong Yiji was a laughingstock at Xianheng Hotel. Warming wine on weekdays was monotonous and boring, only when Kong Yiji came could he "smile" a few times. Kong Yiji had become the only person who could bring joy to "I".

Kong Yiji "made people happy" and did not seek trouble. Compared with the shopkeeper with a "fierce face" and the customer without a "good voice" (Lu, 2005a), Kong Yiji was kind to "I". Kong Yiji's goodness was not innate, but stemmed from the cultivation of scholars. He was tall in stature, but in the face of ridicule from the crowd, he only tried his best to defend himself and never used his height advantage to fight. "I" had also been a student before and was also a marginalized person. "I" was the most likely person in the Xianheng Hotel to feel Kong Yiji's kindness. But Kong Yiji's kindness and repeatedly lowered posture even gave "I"—someone in the same situation as Kong Yiji, a sense of superiority. However, Kong Yiji was not angry, but genuinely regretted "I".

Perhaps "I" carried sympathy for Kong Yiji's experiences, always paying attention to details that others overlook. Those busybodies ridiculed Kong Yiji for not passing the imperial examination to be a scholar. What "I" saw was that Kong Yiji was eager to impart knowledge; the drinker deliberately provoked Kong Yiji's emotions, and what "I" saw was Kong Yiji's gentleness and restraint; The children gathered to join the crowd, and what I saw was Kong Yiji caring for

the children...These small details have restored another Kong Yiji. He loved knowledge, was elegant and polite, had compassion, did not default, and adhered to his moral bottom line.

In Confucianism, “benevolence” is the core, and “goodness” is the foundation. Only when everyone does good deeds and being kind to others can a ruler govern the country through benevolent governance. Kong Yiji was a person who was kind to others. He abided by the moral integrity of a “scholar”, but was too idealistic, and ultimately paid the price of humiliation, pain, and even life for it.

5. Conclusion

It is said that *Kong Yiji* is Lu Xun’s favorite novel among his short stories. A foreign translators once asked Lu Xun to recommend his work, and Kong Yiji is also his first choice (Sun, 1999). This answer surprised many people. In the public’s opinion, Lu Xun’s representative works should be those are highly challenging and able to fully express the author’s thoughts, such as his first vernacular novel *The Diary of a Madman*. The academic community has highly praised similar works and spent a lot of effort researching them, but neglected Lu Xun’s love for *Kong Yiji*. The reason why Lu Xun attached great importance to Kong Yiji is that this novel fully conforms to his philosophy of life, which is “calm and effortless”. Lu Xun once commented on his works, *The Diary of a Madman* is “very childish and too urgent. According to art, it should not be”. Lu Xun’s evaluation on his novel *Medicine* is “Shortness of breath and exhausted”, which means it is not calm enough. Lu Xun advocated for a “surplus” in life, not “leaving no room”, giving people a sense of “oppression and embarrassment” (Lu, 2005b). Only when there is plenty in life, “literature can emerge.” “When emotions are strong, it is not advisable to write poetry, otherwise the exposed edges will be too sharp and the ‘beauty of poetry’ can be killed (Lu, 2005c).” In this way, sensational criticisms such as *The Madman’s Diary* and *The True Story of Ah Q* seem too “sharp in expression” to give people a sense of “oppression and embarrassment”. On the other hand, *Kong Yiji* is beautiful due to its implicit meaning, restrained and composed beauty.

Kong Yiji’s long shirt not only represents the importance of identity and status in society, but also represents Kong Yiji’s independence and self-esteem, and reflects the social class gap and wealth differentiation at that time.

The “fennel bean” is an important descriptive image in Lu Xun’s narrative texts that captures the psychological emotions of characters in specific situations and completes the shaping of character images. It plays a positive role in promoting the development of the story plot, expressing the theme, and deepening the meaning. Taking the “fennel bean” as a clue not only demonstrates Kong Yiji’s kindness and generosity, but also demonstrates his incurability.

This article reshapes Kong Yiji by exploring his identity identification, spiritual identification, and personality complexity. The gap between cultural identity and social identity, the limitations between moral spirit and culture, and the

spirit of the times, as well as the sublation of natural personality and moral personality, these overlapping details give people a new understanding of Kong Yiji.

The author arranges “I” to observe and describe Kong Yiji, which is actually a pity for the characters in the novel. As a young man, “I” did not have a deep understanding of what happened at the Xianheng Hotel, but simply felt the happy air after Kong Yiji’s arriving at the hotel. Twenty years later, “I” had become a middle-aged person. When recalling this past, I took up a pen to record the moments of joy that brought me at that time, but I couldn’t feel any joy in the laughter. Behind the contrast, “I” had a subtle introspection.

At first glance, *Kong Yiji* may seem to be telling a ridiculous story of an ordinary person, but readers will only appreciate the author’s profound meaning and the sadness behind the article after repeated reflections. The author aims to express a complex and profound meaning, but the writing is extremely concise, and the narration is also very flexible, without giving people a sense of urgency, reaching a very high artistic level.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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