

# Analysis on Lu Xun's Attitudes Towards the Imperial Examination System —Take *Kong Yiji* as an Example

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## ABSTRACT

Lu Xun was one of the leaders of the May 4th Movement, which was an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement. He was mostly regarded as a representative writer, whose main proposition was against Confucianism and Chinese traditions. However, the author reckons that what Lu Xun tried to criticize was the negative side of the society generated by the traditions, rather than traditions themselves. The theme of one of his literature works, *Kong Yiji*, was also against the negative product of Chinese traditions, especially the Imperial Examination System that had existed over 1,300 years in ancient China, before the corruption of Qing dynasty. This short novel reveals Lu Xun's main ideas, which involves anti-traditions and anti-Confucianism to a great extent. Therefore, this article aims to analyze Lu Xun's attitude on the Imperial Examination System, and its consequences through quotes that reveal the appearances and personality of the main character and societal atmosphere in late Qing dynasty from *Kong Yiji*. What is more, this article will also introduce how Lu Xun's biography influenced his mainstream ideas, offering a fresh perspective of the specification of Lu Xun's perceptions of the Imperial Examination System.

**Keywords:** Lu Xun, attitude, Chinese feudal society, the Imperial Examination, Kong Yiji

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the learning process of early Chinese culture (1920s to 1930s), the author was exposed to a wide array of prospective writers, and Lu Xun stood out to be the most unique one who thought beyond his era. By reading the preface of *Call to the Arms*, one of Lu Xun's short novel collection, the author further investigated Lu Xun's life story, and became familiar with his hatred toward feudal Chinese culture. However, Lu Xun's other works aroused my skepticism toward his true attitude regarding Chinese traditions. For example, Lu Xun expressed reminiscent emotions for how previous people used to be in his work *Hometown*, which implies his remaining passion for previous Chinese traditions [5]. Nonetheless, Lu Xun made huge effort to criticize the old Chinese society under the rule of an emperor and the control of the Imperial Examination System. Lu Xun's ambivalent stance on perceiving old Chinese traditions invoked the author to dive deeper into Lu Xun's real attitude toward Chinese traditions — whether he was against the traditions themselves or the adverse society generated by the traditions. Aiming to illustrate Lu Xun's attitude with more details, the author takes one of his masterpiece, *Kong Yiji*, as an literary example to analyze the ideas of Lu Xun.

## 2. CHARACTERS, PLOTS AND SETTING IN KONG YIJI

Since this article will place Lu Xun's representative work, *Kong Yiji*, as the main subject of analysis, the author will first introduce the chief plots and settings in this short novel.

The short novel *Kong Yiji* was about the miserable life of Kong Yiji who failed the Imperial Examination. The narrator of this novel, who served as a waiter, recalled a piece of his memory in twenty years ago in a tavern in Luzhen. Two kinds of people often visited the tavern: the working class men who wore short coats and stood drinking at the counter, and the upper social class people who wore long gowns and sat drinking inside. Kong Yiji was the only one who wore a long gown and stood drinking. Kong Yiji failed to become a Xiu Cai (a Xiu Cai passes the lowest official examination) and often spoke with tedious and classical tags and stole to survive. Kong Yiji also refused others to call himself a thief when a rich family's books were stolen, because he reckoned that stealing books was not a stealing behavior. He was treated with contempt and cruelty by surrounding people. Finally, he was beaten until his legs broke when he was caught stealing from a provincial scholar. He dragged himself to the tavern and asked for a bowl of wine, but he had no money. After that, he was not seen by anyone and was

presumed to be dead. The narrator remembered the existence of Kong Yiji for a while but forgot him later. The setting of *Kong Yiji* took place in the late nineteenth century, when the Qing dynasty was at its last and the Imperial Examination still popularized. A minority of students entered the upper social class by winning awards in the Imperial Examination, while the majority of participants failed. Some of them tried multiple times, but gave up ultimately. People similar to Kong Yiji had to stay in the low social class for the rest of their lives, enduring others' critics and disdain.

### 3. BIOGRAPHY OF LU XUN

To analyze the text of *Kong Yiji* at a more profound level, understanding Lu Xun's life will be necessary, since it gives further insights to the comprehension of his attitude toward ancient Chinese Imperial Examination System.

Lu Xun was born in a scholar family in southeastern city, Shaoxing, in China. His grandfather was accused of fraud and went to jail [1]. This caused Lu Xun's family to decline, just as he wrote down in the preface of *Call To The Arms*:

“He who plummets from the heights may gain perspective to discern human snobbishness to the core.”

(*Call To The Arms*, Lu Xun)

Grew up in a falling traditional family, Lu Xun gradually came in to contact with the real societal environment, and began to form his own world view. Along his growth, immersion in books in which Chinese traditional thinking proliferated one step further incited Lu Xun's anti-traditional thought [6].

Another event that hugely shaped Lu Xun's idea was his father's death. Lu Xun, as the eldest son of his family, had the filial duty to call out to his father upon his deathbed. After several calls, his father found Lu Xun to be so annoying and asked him to stop calling. This incident largely caused Lu Xun's later hesitation and desperation from calling out again to the traditional Chinese society after his failure in the first magazine *New Life* [1]. His father's death also reminded him of the incapability of traditional Chinese doctors, the so-called quack doctors, as he mentioned in the preface of *Call to the Arms*:

“I gradually came to the conclusion that those physicians were charlatans, either unintended or deliberate.”

Therefore, Lu Xun became skeptical of the traditional Chinese medicine and this skepticism also inflamed his eagerness to study the feudal history of China in the aftermath of his life [1].

The previous societal ambience was harsh to people like Lu Xun who realized the flaws of Chinese traditions, as Lu Xun illustrated in the preface of *Call to the Arms*:

“Anyone who studied foreign subjects was a social outcast regarded as someone who could find no way out and was forced to sell his soul to foreign devils.”

Despite the negative environment of contemporary society, Lu Xun insisted to go to Nanjing to study physics and other western subjects at the Jiangnan Naval Academy. He also read many western philosophical novels in Chinese

version, and therefore assimilated massive amount of western mainstream ideas [1].

In 1902, Lu Xun went to Sendai Medical College in Japan to study Western medicine [1]. He intended to learn more western medical knowledge in order to save his fellow countrymen in China from diseases. However, after he saw some pictures showed by his instructor at the end of one class, he changed his determination. The preface of *Call to the Arms* stated:

“The one with his hands bound was a spy accused of working for the Russians, who was to be beheaded by the Japanese military as a warning to others, while the Chinese people beside him had come to enjoy the spectacle.”

The indifference of Chinese people toward their compatriots deeply shocked Lu Xun. He realized that curing physical pain was not enough to save his country, a transformation of Chinese spirit was necessarily needed. Therefore, Lu Xun turned to literature studies, because he believed literature was the only thing that could reshape Chinese people's mind and spirit [1].

After Lu Xun returned to China in 1908, he and his fellows published a magazine called *New Life*. They intended to write articles to awaken Chinese people and to make them aware of the changing world atmosphere, but the reaction from the society was complete silence. Lu Xun became more and more lonely and desperate, as stated in the preface of *Call to the Arms*:

“but the real tragedy was for him to lift up his voice among the living and be met with no response, neither approval nor opposition, just as if he were stranded in a boundless desert completely at a loss.”

Although the response from the society was silence, Lu Xun did not become completely out of hope. He sometimes fluctuated between hope and despair, but his despair could never stop him from seeking hope [1].

One might think from the foregoing that Lu Xun was a person who denied traditional Chinese culture completely after his multiple failures to save the ignorant Chinese people. However, what Lu Xun criticized in most of his literature works was not the Chinese tradition itself, but the people who were spiritually hypocritical and whose slogan were to support Chinese traditions, such as Confucianism, but failed to behave consistently [3]. Lu Xun tried so hard to criticize Chinese traditions in his works, not for pure opposition, but for awakening the Chinese people that their society needed reformation [7]. For example, in his first vernacular short novel, *A Madman's Diary*, Lu Xun described the Chinese society as cannibal one, in which Chinese traditions “eat” people who did not obey them. This idea that “traditions eat people” expressed seemingly the theme that the whole Chinese culture was wrong, but Lu Xun actually wanted to disclose the fact that it was the hypocritical people who ate men, not tradition itself.

Lu Xun emphasized in his articles that in order to reshape the Chinese society into a more modern one, people need to add some western factors, politically or culturally, on the basis of old Chinese traditions. Neither the former Chinese culture nor the western culture system was enough to change the contemporary situation. This can be revealed in one of his argumentative article *Fetchism*, in which Lu

Xun expressed firmly that directly bringing western ideology to China was not feasible:

“In a word, we should fetch. We should know which to put to use, which to store and which to destroy. In that way, now the owner would be new owner as well as the house would be new house. However, he should, at least, be calm and brave, able to distinguish, and not self-serving.”

(*Fetchism*, Lu Xun)

Lu Xun wanted the Chinese tradition to have its own examination mechanism. The reason why the Chinese society could not adapt to the modern world after 1909 was the lack of transformation of old Chinese traditions. In other words, the whole Chinese culture was a rigid existence, and the only way to march forward into the new era was to use some extreme method to awaken people from “sleeping”.

#### **4. LITERARY ANALYSIS OF KONG YIJI**

As mentioned before, what Lu Xun criticized was the hypocritical people behind the Chinese traditions, not the traditions itself. Therefore, in his well-known work *Kong Yiji*, Lu Xun denounced those successful participants of the Imperial Examination System, who managed to become officials in the government system but treated people lower than their social status with contempt, discrimination and inequality. In other words, Lu Xun was not excoriating the Imperial Examination System itself, but the people with atrocious spirit generated by the system. In this section, the author will analyze the text from *Kong Yiji* in order to provide the readers with information of how Lu Xun perceived ancient Imperial Examination System.

##### **4.1. Analysis of Kong Yiji’s Appearance**

When describing Kong Yiji’s appearance, Lu Xun used only two sentences:

“He was a big man, strangely pallid, with scars that often showed among the wrinkles of his face. He had a large, unkempt beard, streaked with white. Although he wore a long gown, it was dirty and tattered, and looked as if it had not been washed or mended for over ten years.”

(*Kong Yiji*, Lu Xun)

Descriptions such as “strangely pallid” face, scars, and wrinkles characterize Kong Yiji’s feeble and unhealthy body condition, as well as him receiving indifferent and cruel treatment from others. That Kong Yiji has “a large, unkempt beard with white” and a long gown that is “dirty and tattered” further implies his unstable living circumstance.

##### **4.2. Analysis of Kong Yiji’s Language**

Being a failed participant of the Imperial Examination System, Kong Yiji has deep-rooted belief that passing the Imperial Examination successfully is the only way to

change his life. This faith is so intense that Kong Yiji holds the opinion that people who are “scholars” have every right to do whatever they want without being accused. In other words, not being ignorant elevates this individual to a divine level, which is proved in the following quote:

“Taking a book can’t be considered stealing.... Taking a book, the affair of a scholar, can’t be considered stealing!”

(*Kong Yiji*, Lu Xun)

It is important to note that there are two common representation of “stealing” in Chinese: Qie and Tou. The character “Qie” is belongs to classical Chinese, but the character “Tou” belongs to vernacular Chinese. In the text, Kong Yiji uses the character “Qie” in order to show others his intelligence and privilege as a self-claimed scholar. Books, the seemingly scholarly items, being involved in this incident, Kong Yiji referred his despicable stealing to a condescending action of the upper class intellectuals, and therefore Kong guaranteed his preeminence over others to a larger extent. However, his behavior shows the conflict between hypocritical decency and lamentable degradation which makes him an undeserving loser corrupted by the rigid examination system and the feudal times.

##### **4.3. Analysis of Kong Yiji’s Ambivalent Behaviors**

Apart from Kong Yiji’s appearances and languages, his behaviors and reactions are also crucial evidence of Lu Xun’s attitude toward the Imperial Examination System. From Lu Xun’s description and the previous analysis of *Kong Yiji*, readers can attain the idea that Kong Yiji is an intellectual who was persecuted by feudal ideas, since he died not knowing how the feudal Chinese society persecuted him. Despite his miserable life story, Kong Yiji was contemptuous of the people who did not know any Chinese character and who were farmers and workers. Although he was exceedingly impoverished, he could not embrace the reality that he was already at the lowest social status, which was equivalent to that of those farmers and workers he once was contemptuous of. This can be revealed by one excerpt from *Kong Yiji* states:

“Kong was the only long-gowned customer to drink his wine standing.”

(*Kong Yiji*, Lu Xun)

The stark contrast between “long-gowned”, which symbolizes richness and superiority, and “drink wine standing”, which represents poverty and inferiority, further evidences Kong Yiji’s psychological ambivalence.

The life destination of people similar to Kong Yiji was to pass the Imperial Examination and enter a higher social class, such as becoming a government official and working for the emperor. Therefore, failing to pass the examination became Kong Yiji’s lifelong humiliation. This feature can also be showed by this excerpt:

“How is it you never passed even the lowest official examination?”

At that Kong would look disconsolate and ill at ease. His face would turn pale and his lips move, but only to utter those unintelligible classical expressions.

(*Kong Yiji*, Lu Xun)

When people asked Kong Yiji in a teasing manner about whether he knew how to read, Kong Yiji would perceive this question as “beneath contempt”, because he thought his preeminent calligraphic skills which was known across Luzhen is something that separates him with others. However, after other people laughed at him because he did not pass even the lowest official examination, Kong looked “disconsolate and ill at ease”, which creates stark contrast with his previous reaction. For Kong Yiji, who dedicated his life to the Imperial Examination System and failed, other people’s ridicule would suffice to beat him down.

Lu Xun did not characterize Kong Yiji as a person with one single story: poverty. Instead, Lu Xun strengthened Kong’s personality by describing him as a compassionate and kind person, as can be revealed from his interaction with the children:

“Sometimes children in the neighborhood, hearing laughter, came to join in the fun, and surrounded Kong Yiji. Then he would give them peas flavored with aniseed, one apiece.”

(*Kong Yiji*, Lu Xun)

When Kong was with the children and those children wanted his aniseed flavored peas, he gave many at the beginning despite his poverty. Nonetheless, after the children finished eating the peas, they wanted more. Kong Yiji’s reaction could be illustrated by the following quote:

“Flustered, he would cover the dish with his hand and, bending forward from the waist, would say, “There isn’t much. I haven’t much as it is.”

(*Kong Yiji*, Lu Xun)

Kong, then, would stretch his fingers to cover his plate, and almost begged the children to leave and save some peas for himself. After that, those children left in laughter, and Kong Yiji was not irritated. When Kong asked the narrator how to write the Chinese character “Hui”, which means aniseed, the narrator thought Kong did not deserve to ask him questions, and ignored him. However, Kong waited a few minutes and still wanted to teach him. The narrator subsequently walked away. Kong was not angry, but felt pity for the narrator. His reactions after the children laughed at him and the narrator ignored him evidence his kindness.

Unfortunately, being kind could not suffice other people’s desire to mock him. Kong was surrounded by indifference and cruelty, but Lu Xun wrote down several scenes of laughter, which created the contrast. Kong appeared in laughter, disappeared in laughter, and ended his tragic life in laughter [2]. Admittedly, there are plenty of features of Kong that are reasonable to be laughed at, but other people not only tease his frequent saying of archaisms and stealing acts, but also ridicule his scars and broken leg. Those laughter are merciless, but people gain happiness from it. The repetitious laughter in *Kong Yiji* is on one side negation to Kong’s laziness, self-abandonment, and high opinion of himself, but on the other side critique to other people’s lack of compassion and ignorant spirit [2].

## 5. DISCUSSION

The previous discussion of literary evidence from *Kong Yiji* provides specific and detailed evidence for Lu Xun’s attitude that the hypocritical government officials generated by the Imperial Examination System is what deserves to be criticized. In this section, the author will connect the image of Kong Yiji with Lu Xun’s intentions behind those images.

The rigid spirit of the participants of the examination can be revealed through Lu Xun’s delicate descriptions of Kong Yiji’s behavior. It is crucial to note that Kong Yiji often articulates archaisms such as “Not much! Verily, not much, forsooth” that is not consistent with his real meaning. In this scenario, Kong Yiji tried to tell the children that he could not give them more aniseed flavored peas because he had a little left. However, the archaism mentioned above was extracted from Analects from Confucius, and it has different meaning than “I have little left”. This act is a symbolism of Kong Yiji’s ignorance to archaisms, meaning that he studied and memorized Confucian archaisms without the assimilation of their real meanings. The incomplete understanding of archaisms by Kong Yiji reveals Lu Xun’s condemnation to the sternness of the Imperial Examination participants. Kong Yiji’s lack of ability to make a living for himself reinforced Lu Xun’s critique. According to the text, Kong Yiji earned minimal wages since he only mastered calligraphy, which did not have high monetary value in contemporary society. Therefore, he became increasingly impoverished. This shows that Lu Xun reckoned the intellectuals generated by the Imperial Examination and failed the examination had little ability of surviving in the society, and thus exposed the lack of real world practices. Furthermore, the learning content of the system was what Lu Xun negated. To specify the time era that Lu Xun criticized most, it is important to pay attention to the setting of *Kong Yiji*. This short novel took place in the late nineteenth century, when the Qing dynasty was about to corrupt but the system still operated. The contemporary Examination System focused solely on one’s understanding of Confucian classics, not on one’s practicality or the willingness to explore new academic fields. In other words, it focused on how well one learned rather than how well one could perform [4].

In addition, Lu Xun negated the passers of the Imperial Examination System by creating the character Mr. Ding, who was a provincial candidate. Although the description of this provincial scholar was not abundant, the readers can know that the nature of this person is cruel and selfish. Therefore, it reveals Lu Xun’s contemptuous attitude toward the officials generated by the Imperial Examination System.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This article only analyzed Lu Xun’s subjective view toward Chinese feudal society, so it does not include historical facts from an objective view. However, the

readers can be informed of the mindset of Lu Xun, who was a representative author in the early stage of contemporary Chinese society and possessed unprecedented prospective opinions. He was able to jump out of the ambience of the old society and evaluate his country's history with an extremely objective perspective. In *Kong Yiji*, readers can take a glance at his negative attitude towards ancient Imperial Examination System. Apart from *Kong Yiji*, there are many literature works that can reflect Lu Xun's attitude toward the flaws of ancient China. Through reading his work, the readers can not only appreciate his delicate and multi-dimensional analysis of old Chinese society, but also perceive Chinese history from another angle.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I want to thank gratefully to Professor Wang, who gave me instructions on Lu Xun's works and guided me through this essay. Also, I present my greatest gratitude to my teaching assistant, Mengyang Su, who gave me precious advice on the organization of this essay. Finally, I would like to thank my paper teacher for the delicate instructions on the ideas and thesis of my paper. Without them, I could not finish my first paper.

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