

KONG YIJI

by Lu Xun

Lu Xun (the pen name of Zhou Shuren, 1881-1936) was the most influential Chinese writer of the early twentieth century. In the years leading up to the Republican Revolution of 1911, Lu Xun gave up a career as a medical man, believing China more desperately needed writers to cure its social and spiritual sicknesses than doctors to tend to the body. He became a strident advocate of political and educational reform, and his beautifully written short stories stand as wonderfully insightful social commentary.



“Kong Yiji,” written in March 1919, pictures the social decay of pre-revolutionary China two decades earlier in order to describe the past that Lu Xun believed China needed to break away from. The story is a poignant and engaging one, but the message to its Chinese readers hinged on the symbolic roles played by its characters. The main figure, Kong Yiji, captures the sad decay of the old Confucian scholarly tradition, with its complex mix of sincere morality, sham learning, and outdated irrelevance. The unseen provincial scholar Ding represents the hypocrisy of the class of successful “Confucian” office-holders, whose path to social prestige and power relied on the forms but not the spirit of moral education. The wine shop owner symbolizes the class of small urban entrepreneurs, out for themselves with no hint of social vision. The peasants and workers who frequent “Prosperity Tavern” reveal Lu Xun’s pessimistic evaluation of the social consciousness of the great majority of Chinese common people. And through the narrator, who innocently describes his boyhood responses to all these people, Lu Xun subtly indicates his troubled sense of the way in which China’s future generation may draw lessons from the representatives of its past and present. The sad cast of characters represents Lu Xun’s allegorical portrait of China’s crippled political culture at the turn of an era, a culture mired in degenerate forms of its past, and unequipped with any understanding of how to address the future – or even that the future need be addressed.

The wine shops in Luzhen are not like those in other parts of China. They all have right-angled counters facing the street, where hot water is kept ready for warming wine. When men come off work at midday and in the evening they buy a bowl of wine; it cost four coppers twenty years ago, but now it costs ten. Standing beside the counter, they drink it warm, and relax. Another copper will buy a plate of salted bamboo shoots or *huixiang* peas flavored with aniseed, to go with the wine, while for a dozen coppers you can buy a meat dish. But most of these customers belong to the short-coated class, few of whom can afford this. Only those in long gowns enter the adjacent room to order wine and dishes, and sit and drink at leisure.

At the age of twelve I started work as a waiter in Prosperity Tavern, at the entrance to the town. The tavern keeper said I looked too foolish to serve the long-gowned customers, so I was given work in the outer room. Although the short-coated customers there were more easily pleased, there were quite a few trouble-makers among them too. They would insist on watching with their own eyes as the yellow wine was ladled from the keg, looking to see if there were any water at the bottom of the wine pot, and inspecting for themselves the immersion of the pot in hot water. Under such keen scrutiny, it was very difficult to dilute the wine. So after a few days my employer decided I was not suited for this work. Fortunately, I had been recommended by someone influential so he could not dismiss me, and I was transferred to the dull work of warming wine.

Thereafter I stood all day behind the counter, fully engaged with my duties. Although I gave satisfaction at this work, I found it monotonous and futile. Our employer was a fierce-looking individual, and the customers were a morose lot, so that it was impossible to be gay. Only when Kong Yiji came to the tavern could I laugh a little. That is why I still remember him.

Kong was the only long-gowned customer to drink his wine standing. 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. He used so many archaisms in his speech it was impossible to understand half he said. As his surname was Kong, he was nicknamed “Kong Yiji,” the first three characters in a children's copy-book.* Whenever he came into the shop, everyone would look at him and chuckle. And someone would call out:

*Kong was Confucius's family name. The character with which it is written is a simple one. In traditional China, when boys were first taught how to write they were made to copy a short poem composed of very easily written characters, of which the first three were “*Kong yi ji*.”

“Kong Yiji! There are some fresh scars on your face!”

Ignoring this remark, Kong would come to the counter to order two bowls of heated wine and a dish of *huixiang* peas. For this he produced nine coppers. Someone else would call out, in deliberately loud tones:

“You must have been stealing again!”

“Why ruin a man's good name groundlessly?” he would ask, opening his eyes wide.

“Pooh, good name indeed! The day before yesterday I saw you with my own eyes being hung up and beaten for stealing books from the He family!”

Then Kong would flush, the veins on his forehead standing out as he remonstrated: “Taking a book can't be considered stealing. . . . Taking a book, the affair of a scholar, can't be considered stealing!” Then followed quotations from the classics, like, “A gentleman keeps his integrity even in poverty,” and a jumble of archaic expressions till everybody was roaring with laughter and the whole tavern was gay.

From gossip I heard that Kong Yiji had studied the classics but had never passed the official examination. With no way of making a living, he grew poorer and poorer, until he was practically reduced to beggary. Happily, he was a good calligrapher, and could get enough copying work to support himself. Unfortunately he had failings: he liked drinking and was lazy. So after a few days he would invariably disappear, taking books, papers, brushes and inkstone with him. After this had happened several times, nobody wanted to employ him as a copyist again. Then there was no alternative for him but to take to occasional pilfering. In our tavern his behavior was exemplary. He never failed to pay up, although sometimes, when he had no ready money, his name would appear on the board where we listed debtors. However, in less than a month he would always settle, and his name would be wiped off the board again.

After drinking half a bowl of wine, Kong would regain his composure. But then someone would ask:

“Kong Yiji, do you really know how to read?”

When Kong looked as if such a question were beneath contempt, they would continue: “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. Then everybody would laugh heartily again, and the whole tavern would be merry.

At such times, I could join in the laughter without being scolded by my master. In fact he often put such questions to Kong himself, to evoke laughter. Knowing it was no use talking to them, Kong would chat to us children. Once he asked me:

“Have you had any schooling?”

When I nodded, he said, “Well then, I’ll test you. How do you write the character ‘hui’ in *huixiang* peas?”

I thought, “I’m not going to be tested by a beggar!” So I turned away and ignored him. After waiting for some time, he said very earnestly:

“You can’t write it? I’ll show you how. Mind you remember! You ought to remember such characters, because later when you have a shop of your own, you’ll need them to make up your accounts.”

It seemed to me I was still very far from owning a shop. Besides, our employer never entered *huixiang* peas in the account book. Amused yet exasperated, I answered listlessly:

“Who wants you as a teacher? Isn’t it the character hui with the grass radical?”

Kong was delighted, and tapped two long fingernails on the counter. “Right, right!” he said, nodding. “Only there are four different ways of writing *hui*. Do you know them?” My patience exhausted, I scowled and made off. Kong Yiji had dipped his finger in wine, in order to trace the characters on the counter; but when he saw how indifferent I was, he sighed and looked most disappointed.

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. After eating the peas, the children would still hang round, their eyes on the dish. 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.” Then straightening up to look at the peas again, he would shake his head. “Not much! Verily, not much, forsooth!” Then the children would scamper off, with shouts of laughter.

Kong Yiji was very good company, but we got along all right without him too.

One day, a few days before the Mid-Autumn Festival, the tavern keeper was laboriously making out his accounts. Taking down the board from the wall, he suddenly said: “Kong Yiji hasn’t been in for a long time. He still owes nineteen coppers!” That made me realize how long it was since we had seen him.

“How could he come?” one of the customers said. “His legs were broken in that last beating.”

“Ah!”

“He was stealing again. This time he was fool enough to steal from Mr. Ding, the provincial scholar! As if anybody could get away with that!”

“What then?”

“What then? First he had to write a confession, then he was beaten. The beating lasted nearly all night, until his legs were broken.”

“And then?”

“Well, his legs were broken.”

“Yes, but after that?”

“After? . . . Who knows? He may be dead.”

The tavern keeper did not pursue his questions, but went on slowly making up his accounts.

After the Mid-Autumn Festival the wind grew colder every day, as winter came on. Even though I spent all my time by the stove, I had to wear my padded jacket. One afternoon, when the shop was empty, I was sitting with my eyes closed when I heard a voice:

“Warm a bowl of wine.”

The voice was very low, yet familiar. But when I looked up, there was no one in sight. I stood up and looked towards the door, and there, facing the threshold, beneath the counter, sat Kong Yiji. His face was haggard and lean, and he looked in a terrible condition. He had on a ragged lined jacket, and was sitting cross-legged on a mat which was attached to his shoulders by a straw rope. When he saw me, he repeated:

“Warm a bowl of wine.”

At this point my employer leaned over the counter and said: “Is that Kong Yiji? You still owe nineteen coppers!”

“That . . . I'll settle next time,” replied Kong, looking up disconsolately. “Here's ready money; the wine must be good.”

The tavern keeper, just as in the past, chucked and said:

“Kong Yiji, you've been stealing again!”

But instead of protesting vigorously, the other simply said:

“You like your joke.”

“Joke? If you didn't steal, why did they break your legs?”

“I fell,” said Kong in a low voice. “I broke them in a fall.” His eyes pleaded with the tavern keeper to let the matter drop. By now several people had gathered round, and they all laughed. I warmed the wine, carried it over, and set it on the threshold. He produced four coppers from his ragged coat pocket, and placed them in my hand. As he did so I saw that his hands were covered with mud – he must have crawled to the shop on them. Presently he finished the wine and, amid the laughter and comments of the others, slowly dragged himself off by his hands.

A long time went by after that without our seeing Kong again. At the end of the year, when the tavern keeper took down the board, he said, “Kong Yiji still owes nineteen coppers!” At the Dragon Boat Festival the next year, he said the same thing again. But when the Mid-Autumn Festival came, he did not mention it. And another New Year came round without our seeing any more of him.

Nor have I ever seen him since – probably Kong Yiji is really dead.

[RE trans.]