

The Passive Perspective of Sunflower Kernels and the Allegory of National Character in "Eating Melon Seeds"

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Abstract. In 1930s China, social crisis coexisted with the routines of urban everyday life. The humorous and leisurely familiar essay, while offering emotional relief in circulation, also concealed expressions of anxiety about reality. Taking Feng Zikai's prose essay "Eating Melon Seeds" as its object of study, this paper focuses on how the passive perspective of sunflower kernels generates an allegory of national character. In terms of methodology, the study integrates close reading with contextual analysis, and adopts narratology, rhetorical analysis, and imagistic analysis as its core analytical instruments. On the one hand, it offers a structured examination of key narrative devices in the essay, including shifts in perspective, chains of action, and sound rhythms such as "gepei" and "didi." On the other hand, it cross-validates the essay's expressive strategies and semantic extensions through comparison with different editions of *Essays of the Yuanyuan Hall* and with existing scholarship. The study shows that the work shifts the center of narration from the eater to the passive presence of the object, constructs a palpable experience of time through action and sound, and, through irony and ellipsis, allows criticism to emerge naturally from quotidian detail. In the end, the repetitive act of private amusement reaches a point where it leads to the dissipation of vitality and the formation of collective spiritual inertia. This paper argues that, in the light and flexible form of the familiar essay, "Eating Melon Seeds" achieves an allegorical mode of expression. Its value lies not in explicit admonition, but in its ability to activate readers' self-vigilance and reflection on modernity through a narrative mechanism.

Keywords: "Eating Melon Seeds", Feng Zikai, narrative perspective, allegory of national character

1. Introduction

Overall, research on Feng Zikai's works has reached a relatively mature and systematic stage, with a rather well-established and rich scholarly trajectory having already taken shape. Existing studies have, on the one hand, approached the spiritual core of his work from broader perspectives such as his cartoons, prose writing, and artistic thought; on the other hand, they have also undertaken close readings from more specific angles, including prose form, linguistic style, and the relationship between text and image. Discussions in these areas have become increasingly comprehensive and well organized.

With regard specifically to "Eating Melon Seeds," scholarship is by no means absent. A considerable number of appreciative essays have already noted its humorous tone and satirical implications, indicating that this text has long been within the scholarly field of vision. Overall, however, relevant interpretations still tend to remain at the level of thematic judgments such as "satire of custom" or "critique of national character." There remains room for further refinement regarding how the work gradually generates its critical force through narrative perspective, rhythmic sequences of action, auditory imagery, and ironic ellipsis. On this basis, the present paper takes "Eating Melon Seeds" as its object of study and concentrates on the relationship between the passive perspective of the sunflower kernel and the formation of an allegory of national character. In particular, it explains how the essay, while writing about leisure and amusement, shifts its narrative center so that the silent predicament of being eaten acquires allegorical resonance.

Around this theme, the paper addresses four major questions. First, how does the text move from an eater-centered perspective to the passive presence of the object, thereby making the fate of the sunflower kernel the axis of meaning? Second, how do the procedural representations of the chain of actions and the sound rhythms of "gepei" and "didi" transform leisure experience into a palpable experience of time, so that an apparently light mood gradually accumulates a darker undertone of stagnation? Third, how does the work rely on irony and ellipsis so that its criticism is not stated directly in the manner of political commentary, yet slowly approaches the reader in laughter and prompts reflection? Fourth, when the text links "sunflower kernel–seed eater–nation-state" into a hierarchical relation, how does this allegorical extension form an internally progressive structure rather than an abrupt leap? Methodologically, this paper combines close reading with contextual analysis. Internally, it traces the coordinated operation of narrative perspective, decomposition of action, auditory imagery, and rhetorical strategy; externally, it restores the text to the social psychology and essay tradition of the 1930s, when crisis and leisure coexisted, and cross-checks the analysis against relevant scholarship. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to advance the interpretation of "Eating Melon Seeds" from thematic labeling to an explanation of mechanism, thereby offering a more operational analytical approach to Feng Zikai's prose. At the same time, it suggests that the essay still retains interpretive force today: under conditions in which attention is increasingly fragmented, the problem it reveals—namely, the chronic dissipation of time through minor rhythms—has only become more widespread. In this sense, the paper also proposes a way of reading and research that pays closer attention to the connective path between "microscopic everyday life," "narrative mechanism," and "collective psychology," so that hidden yet continuous forms of self-wear may be identified and explained earlier.

2. The passive perspective of the sunflower kernel

In "Eating Melon Seeds," Feng Zikai demonstrates the sensibility of both a painter and a prose writer. In describing the act of eating seeds, he first uses a string of verbs—"pick up, put in, bite, turn, place, draw out, eat"—to break the action down into clearly distinguishable steps, sketching a set of procedures so practiced that they operate almost automatically, much as one might produce a rapid sketch [1]. Yet within this process centered on the eater, he does not simply depict human ease and self-satisfaction. Instead, he quietly shifts the tip of his pen toward the one being eaten—the predicament of the sunflower kernel—which he records in an almost cool tone, thereby forming a strikingly original mode of observation. Its distinctive value lies in its capacity to break through the habitual anthropocentric perspective. In traditional narratives, things are always silent and passive, mere extensions of subjective human will. In Feng Zikai's writing, however, the sunflower kernel seems to acquire a slight degree of "subjectivity"—to be sure, a passive subjectivity. What does the

kernel undergo at the moment when its shell is bitten open? It has no voice and no means of resistance. It can only wait to be rolled away by the tongue, or be carelessly crushed and spat out together with broken shell and grit. This "pain of the object" faintly echoes Zhuangzi's notion of the transformation of things, while also anticipating the "turn to the object" emphasized in later ecocriticism. Feng Zikai refrains from anthropomorphically speaking on behalf of the kernel. Instead, he prompts readers to recognize that beneath every seemingly effortless act of consumption, there exists a set of force relations that do not require overt declaration to maintain their existence.

This perspective first falls upon the fragility of the kernel. Feng Zikai writes in unusually fine detail about his own awkwardness in cracking seeds. Applying too much force, he turns the seed into "countless fragments," and can only "spit all the saliva-stained pieces into the palm of the hand, carefully pick them over, remove the fragments of shell, and then use the tip of the tongue to lick up the fragments of kernel" [2]. Phrases such as "stained with saliva," "spit into the palm," and "lick up" immediately strip eating of its decorum and aesthetic appeal, leaving only the crude and violent treatment suffered by the "kernel" as an object. More ironically still, even such care does not prevent mistakes, because "one side of a fragment of shell is also white and indistinguishable from the kernel," so that one may accidentally swallow it and find that it feels "just like chewing sand." The whiteness of the kernel, which ought to signify edibility and value, is easily confused with the whiteness of the broken shell; value is thereby worn down and leveled within mechanical operation. At this point, the text is no longer merely making self-mocking fun of one person's clumsiness. Rather, it turns its gaze to the "fate of the object": the process by which the kernel moves from wholeness to fragmentation, from cleanliness to contamination, and from delicacy to grit is rendered in a way that leaves the reader with a sinking feeling. In Feng Zikai's prose there is a quiet compassion: pity for the tiny thing that passively endures everything, and vigilance toward the way "habit" renders violence natural and self-evident [3].

This passive experience is then further magnified through the description of sound. The recurring sounds "gepei" and "didi" that run through the entire text are both displays of the seed eater's skill and accompaniment to leisure time; at the same time, they function more like a declaration that the shell has burst open and the kernel has been captured and brought to an end. Each crisp "didi" corresponds to the termination of one kernel's independent existence. The author keenly perceives that it is precisely these slight, dense, and continuous sounds of rupture that gather into an almost terrifying rhythm—a rhythm that does not rely on anything dramatic, yet is capable of wearing away enormous amounts of time without one even noticing. In this way, the kernel's passive sacrifice is "quantified" and "counted" at the auditory level, as if the hollow passage of time itself were ticking away, one knock after another, by means of human hands and teeth.

It is also here that passive experience at the individual level is pushed toward a larger collective imagination. At the end of the essay, Feng Zikai suddenly arrives at a startling association: "If this practice continues to develop, I fear that all of China may be annihilated in the sounds of 'gepei' and 'didi.'" The word "annihilated" is especially striking. It causes the fate of the sunflower kernel to overlap metaphorically with the fate of the country: just as the kernel is gradually consumed amid the unnoticed sounds of "didi," might not the vitality and energy of the nation also be quietly nibbled away and slowly exhausted in the unconscious and meaningless "leisure" of countless citizens? At this point, the passive perspective of the "sunflower kernel" no longer remains a description of a tiny edible seed alone. It develops from a physical detail into psychological chill and then extends into a social allegory. This progressive layering allows the essay's criticism to achieve a heavy resonance beneath its light surface, without depending on loud pronouncements [4].

3. Leisurely behavior and national character

If the passive perspective of the "sunflower kernel" provides a silent object for observation and a foothold for metaphor, then Feng Zikai's richly detailed portrayal of the act of "eating melon seeds" depicts the human being as subject—that is, a way of life and a mode of spirit. He calls eating melon seeds one of the three "most proper" doctoral qualifications of the Chinese people. In just a few strokes, he transforms an everyday habit into a socially performative ritual that can both pass the time and display identity.

The essay records the "techniques" of different social roles in a style almost resembling notes. Young masters appear composed, and when the seed enters the mouth they bite it with a "ge" sound; yet they "do not know the proper method," so that saliva soaks the shell and it slips about in the hand, becoming instead a mark of the leisured class's languor. Young ladies, by contrast, perform an elaborate and refined sequence: with "orchid-like fingers" they hold the seed, lightly bite it with their front teeth, make two "di, di" sounds, split the shell, slightly turn the head aside, and draw the kernel into the mouth. Their movements are nimble, graceful, and elegant. What is classic here lies not only in the precision with which the actions are decomposed, but in the way the passage reveals the mechanisms of distinction hidden behind the ritual. The young masters' lack of skill is not shameful, while the young ladies' elegance resembles a display of cultivated temperament. Eating melon seeds thus exceeds oral appetite and becomes a performance of social posture, status display, and gendered temperament [5].

From here, Feng Zikai opens up a distinctive path of criticism of national character. Lu Xun tended to confront and dissect the social roots of illness directly, whereas Feng Zikai reveals the essence of everyday life through a gentler perspective. Their intellectual backgrounds and critical methods differ, yet both reflect on the same question: how can a people that overvalues superficial techniques while slighting productive creation establish itself within modern competition? Feng Zikai's criticism is mild but not weak; it expresses a profound perception of "sorrowing over their misfortune and resenting their failure to struggle."

He points out that this is a practitioner-style form of leisure, whose entire "activity" lies in researching how to kill time more efficiently. Because melon seeds cannot make one full, one never tires of eating them; because shelling them requires continuous effort, the eater obtains in the illusion of "exertion" a tiny sense of satisfaction and pleasure, and thus becomes addicted, trapped in an endless cycle. Precious vitality is then chipped away bit by bit in repetitive motions and illusory gratification.

Placed against the background of national crisis, the statement that "all of China may be annihilated in the sounds of 'gepei' and 'didi'" is no alarmist exaggeration; rather, it points to a more hidden chronic malady. The problem is that in an age that ought to demand energetic striving, the spirit instead sinks into a self-numbing form of inert yet "active" passivity. Young masters, young ladies, and housewives are merely samples; behind them lies the pathology of social custom itself. The ritual of eating melon seeds thus comes to symbolize a national spirit lacking both vital impulse and external responsibility. It also forms a contrast with opium smoking: the latter is a bodily and visible poison, whereas the former is a spiritual and concealed form of chronic consumption—made all the harder to perceive because of its very ubiquity and "propriety." [6].

4. The critical force of prose

The artistic brilliance of Feng Zikai's "Eating Melon Seeds" lies not merely in the fact that it is interestingly written, but in the way it steadily fuses the light form of the familiar essay with the

serious content of social criticism. He does not take the route of direct political commentary: he does not speak head-on, nor does he hurry to deliver conclusions. Instead, he exploits the essay's strength in "seeing the large through the small" and "clarifying principle through things," beginning from an extremely ordinary action and allowing criticism to emerge gradually through image and situation. Precisely for this reason, the power of the essay does not rely on slogans but on structure. At first reading, the reader finds amusement; only upon closer reading does one perceive the weight of its layered progression.

The core structure of the essay is, in fact, a progressively unfolding metaphorical relation of "sunflower kernel–seed eater–nation-state." On the surface, it merely describes the pleasure and technique of eating seeds. At the middle level, however, a clear tension has already appeared: on one side stands the passive fate of the kernel, and on the other the practiced, active, almost performative ritual of cracking seeds. Between the two there naturally exists a dramatic contrast. Going still deeper, what the essay truly evokes is the modern anxiety that individual life value may be consumed within invisible mechanisms, while national vitality may gradually dissipate in collective unconscious leisure. Feng Zikai resembles an allegorist of exquisite restraint. His choice of the image of the "seed" is especially apt: it is cheap, common, and seemingly insignificant, much like the trivial scraps of time and the tiny portions of life that are ceaselessly wasted in everyday existence. At the same time, the process of consuming it has a peculiar duality: it requires technique and readily becomes addictive, yet it always carries an apparently harmless surface. This corresponds exactly to a style of life that appears refined but is in fact numb.

This metaphorical structure does not arise accidentally. Behind it lies Feng Zikai's consistent artistic temperament and worldview. His prose is already endowed with a painter - like power of observation and a pronounced sense of rhythm. These qualities are particularly conspicuous when he depicts actions; with merely a few strokes of description, he can vividly present postures, expressions, and atmospheres. Many passages in *Eating Melon Seeds* bear a resemblance to plain sketching. Moreover, they also exhibit a cartoon - like distillation of details. Many passages in "Eating Melon Seeds" resemble plain sketching and also a cartoon-like distillation. They seem exaggerated, yet are not untrue, because he captures precisely the point that best reveals the problem. At a deeper level, his attentiveness and compassion toward small lives and ordinary things cause the essay's criticism to exceed mere satire on social custom and take on a heavier sense of pity. What makes the sunflower kernel's predicament so uncomfortable is not only that it points toward "national character," but that the author genuinely sees how an object is consumed, instrumentalized, and discarded in silence [7].

Accordingly, the greatest strength of this prose essay lies precisely in the seriousness within its humor and the anxiety beneath its leisurely tone. With an ironic brush, Feng Zikai confers upon his compatriots the title of "doctor of seed eating." Readers may initially laugh, but once the sound of "gepei" continues to echo, once the fate of the kernel—crushed, mistakenly swallowed, and spat out—gradually unfolds, and once the association that "all of China may be annihilated in the sound of cracking seeds" suddenly descends, that laughter slowly congeals. Feng Zikai places what is in fact a very weighty question, one concerning the state of national vitality, into a piece that appears light and slight. In doing so, he demonstrates that microscopic observations of daily life can indeed reach profound judgments about the pathologies of the age. For precisely this reason, "Eating Melon Seeds" belongs not only to the era in which it was written. It also retains strong warning significance for the present, an age easily addicted to fragmented entertainment and inclined to squander time unconsciously [8-10].

5. Conclusion

In sum, taking Feng Zikai's prose essay "Eating Melon Seeds" as its object of study, this paper has analyzed how the passive perspective of the sunflower kernel generates an allegory of national character. Through close reading, it becomes clear that the work first shifts its narrative perspective from an eater-centered viewpoint to the passive presence of the object, thereby making the predicament of the kernel an implicit clue for observing everyday life. Second, through its depiction of the chain of actions—"pick up, put in, bite, turn, place, draw out, eat"—together with sound rhythms such as "gepei" and "didi," the essay transforms apparently light leisure behavior into a perceptible experience of time and gradually reveals the implication that vitality is consumed by repetitive acts. On this basis, the text further elevates individual leisure experience into an allegorical reflection on the national spirit by means of irony and ellipsis, enabling "Eating Melon Seeds" to display an implicit yet profound critical force within the light form of the familiar essay.

This study nevertheless has certain limitations. Since the analysis predominantly centers on the internal textual structure and narrative mechanism, the exploration of the historical context in which the work emerged and the more extensive genealogy of Feng Zikai's prose fails to reach a sufficient level. Future research may therefore reconsider the intellectual sources and cultural significance of "Eating Melon Seeds" within a broader literary-historical background and, by linking Feng Zikai's cartoons with his prose, further explore the relationship between his writing of everyday life and his critique of modernity. In this way, the position of this work within the tradition of modern Chinese prose may be understood more comprehensively.

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