A Comparative Study of the Existential Resistance Consciousness of Camus and Shi Tiesheng

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Abstract: Albert Camus, the founder of "Absurdist Philosophy," portrays the absurdity and alienation of individuals in a strange world in his works. He opposes the ideology of submission, celebrates the spirit of resistance in adversity, and explores the true meaning of life. Shi Tiesheng, a renowned contemporary Chinese writer, questions the meaning of existence in the face of illness and hardship, reaching remarkable heights through imagination and speculation. Although there is ample research on both writers individually, there is a lack of comparative studies in literature and philosophy. This paper integrates relevant theories and recent research findings to conduct an in-depth study of the works and philosophical outlooks of Camus and Shi Tiesheng regarding existential dilemmas, religious choices, and collective resistance consciousness, exploring their explorations in resistance consciousness and existential challenges. Additionally, this paper explores the perspectives of Camus and Shi Tiesheng on the collective fate of humanity, discussing the insights brought about by people's reflections on modes of existence due to the global pandemic in 2019. This study broadens the research scope, deepening the understanding of these two writers, particularly regarding their existential resistance consciousness, which is inspiring for individuals to find meaning in adversity.

Keywords: Camus, Shi Tiesheng, life, absurdity, resistance

1. Introduction

Albert Camus is a representative figure of French existentialist literature and also the founder of "Absurdist Philosophy." In his works, the sense of alienation, guilt, and the absurdity intertwined with death are pervasive in a strange world. However, he opposes the idea of "inevitable human failure" and praises the fearless spirit of resistance in adversity.

Coincidentally, Shi Tiesheng is a famous contemporary Chinese novelist and essayist. Despite experiencing unimaginable suffering from paralysis and kidney disease, he also questioned the meaning of survival in despair and loneliness, reaching unprecedented heights and breadth in contemporary thought through extraordinary speculation.

Through research, it is evident that scholars internationally have varied forms of research on Camus, involving multiple fields such as Absurdist Philosophy and metaphorical interpretations of illness. For example, Akosua N. Tuffuorhe and Richard Payne's co-authored paper in 2017, "Isolation and Suffering Related to Serious and Terminal Illness: Metaphors and Lessons From Albert Camus'

Novel, The Plague," elucidates the challenges posed by metaphors of disease and the isolation of the soul in "The Plague." Porz Rouven and Widdershoven Guy's paper in 2010 published in Bioethics, "Predictive testing and existential absurdity: resonances between experiences around genetic diagnosis and the philosophy of Albert Camus," explores the struggle of patients with feelings of isolation from the perspective of Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus." .

Research on Shi Tiesheng is primarily conducted in China. For instance, Yang Lan's paper published in 2015 at Yunnan University, "Finding Directions on a Broken Wheel: On Shi Tiesheng's Consciousness of Suffering in Writing," discusses suffering and transcendence from the perspectives of suffering and transcendence, and explores how to transcend suffering ultimately. While domestic and international research on Camus focuses on the field of "Absurdist Philosophy," research on Shi Tiesheng focuses on the relationship between illness and the individual's internal world, with relatively few horizontal comparisons of the two authors' existential resistance consciousness. Some Chinese writers have focused on the commonalities in the thinking of the two individuals, such as scholar Wang Weili's comparison of Sisyphus in Camus' work, the "passerby" in Lu Xun's work, and the blind qin player in Shi Tiesheng's work as figures of struggle against fate. [1]This has significant implications for this paper.

This paper takes "existential resistance consciousness" as its perspective to comparatively study the literary creations and philosophical speculation of both individuals. The research methods include literature research, textual analysis, comparative analysis, and inductive summarization. Through in-depth reading of the original works and relevant literature, the connotations of the works of both individuals and the similarities and differences in their life philosophies are analyzed to broaden their understanding of Chinese and Western cultures.

In the post-pandemic era, people have begun to rethink the fragility of life, the integration of individual values, and collectivism. Combining the latest research findings and theoretical works, this paper aims to conduct a comprehensive and in-depth comparative study of the connotations and life philosophies of Camus and Sartre's works from a realistic perspective. The goal is to explore how humanity, when faced with unavoidable existential challenges, sparks a sense of resistance through the exploration of human ontology, prompting a reconsideration of the destiny of humankind. This study seeks to deepen our understanding of Camus and Sartre's philosophical connotations of "resistance within the collective."

2. The Birth of Resistance Consciousness in Existential Challenges

2.1. The Dual Nature of Illness

Illness is a recurring theme throughout the lives of both Camus and Sartre, with its impact on their literary creations being twofold. Nietzsche focused on the positive aspect of illness, proposing concepts such as the "diseased artist" and "deranged artist" based on Greek philosophy [2], with the central idea being that only through enduring pain can one grasp knowledge and truth, thereby achieving the sublimation of art through enlightenment. His "spirit of Dionysus" is also evident in the works of both Camus and Sartre.

For Camus, tuberculosis was a lingering shadow throughout his life, yet amidst this endless suffering, he grasped onto the absurd symbolism . He refused to succumb to the dictates of fate, unwilling to "contemplate the eternal sky" passively. Illness, for Camus, was more like a severed path, constantly reminding him of his existence through resistance .

Camus was diagnosed with tuberculosis at the age of 17, and he lived with this tormenting illness for the rest of his life. Sartre, in commemorating Camus, wrote that even though his dear friend suffered this heavy blow in his youth, he still "discovered the absurd—the negation of human stupidity." [3] Combining Camus's early works such as "The Happy Death" and "The Wedding

Collection," we can glimpse his fear of death. The phrase "I don't want to die" [4]is filled with his hopes for life, while also expressing his contemplation under the crisis of existence, tightly linked to his individual experience .

In "The Life of Albert Camus," Olivier judged that the fever caused by tuberculosis not only intensified the visual impact of colors on people but sometimes even evolved into painful light stimuli. Camus often used the imagery of flames and high temperatures to describe suffering, such as "This is my love for life, silently and intensely loving everything that may escape from me, the suffering buried beneath the blazing flames." [5]Such descriptions are likely manifestations of the author's hallucinations during fever.

At the age of twenty-one, Sartre was diagnosed with "multiple sclerosis," which left him paralyzed in both legs. Various complications such as uremia also threatened his health. In the early stages of his illness, this young man who once loved sports increasingly sank into depression, becoming unpredictable and irritable.

However, it was through the repeated questioning of fate that he gradually moved away from the stage of resentment, beginning to ponder the meaning of life and integrating scattered thoughts into a metaphysical philosophy of life. During the long "night of writing," Sartre realized the limits of human existence and accepted the fact that death is inevitable . "A person, once born, this is no longer a debatable issue, but a fact given to him by God."[6] This common destiny that everyone must accept is the journey towards death, thus "death is a festival that will inevitably come." [6]. Sartre acknowledged the helplessness of individuals in the face of fate but opposed rushing into the embrace of death. In his profound spiritual process of deeply understanding suffering, the specific life struggles were elevated to a universal tragic consciousness of humanity. Through this tragic consciousness, Sartre presents us with the depth and breadth of the soul, depicting the true picture of faith [7].

2.2. The Oppression of the Social Environment

The tide of the times shaped the personalities of both Camus and Sartre, and the external environment influenced their literary creations. Camus lost his father in World War I and witnessed the cruelty and absurdity of World War II firsthand. Sartre, under the ten-year "Cultural Revolution," saw the tyranny and harm of violent poetry to humanity. Both men floated in the era, and their viewpoints and positions differed subtly due to their identities.

In an era where death could strike at any moment, the slogans of freedom and equality were widely questioned during wartime, giving rise to irrationalism and existentialist thoughts. As Engels said: "The philosophy of each epoch is the spiritual heritage handed down to it by its predecessors, and it is based on the specific intellectual materials that arise from it." Through his contemplation of real life, Camus created a unique Western philosophical system in a more specific way.

After actively leading the publication of underground publications upon joining the anti-fascist army, Camus began to reflect on the meaning of his actions following the Soviet "Great Purge" and his expulsion from the party in 1937. He supported socialism but opposed any means to achieve so-called "socialism." Camus's philosophy of life was fundamentally formed through his understanding of society and politics. He believed that the world is absurd, even to the point of being overwhelming, but everyone should strive to resist it as much as possible.

If Camus completely immersed himself in society, both spiritually and in action, and actively resisted, then Sartre always viewed the turbulent society from an outsider's perspective, with a hint of political wisdom.

Sartre's era was filled with blind enthusiasm, yet this enthusiasm not only failed to promote intellectual freedom but also exacerbated people's fears. In this contradictory social state, "movements" and "struggles" became the norm, with people being indignant without knowing why. Moral judgments and feelings of compassion gradually gave way to mainstream societal thoughts.

Shi Tiesheng's grandmother once held the status of a landlord. During the era of class struggle, anyone associated with the term "landlord" was considered to be against the people. This stigma of shame accompanied Shi Tiesheng throughout his youth, leading to a sense of inferiority and an identity as an outsider in society. Despite the challenges, this experience shaped Shi Tiesheng's unique writing style, allowing his outsider perspective to stand out in the literary world.

3. A Profound Exploration of the Meaning of Survival

3.1. Denial and Rejection of Suicide Psychology

Both Shi Tiesheng and Albert Camus, two thinkers who danced with death, contemplated suicide as a means of self-redemption amidst life's adversities. However, upon examining the roots of their misfortunes, they found suicide to be inherently futile. Instead of succumbing to despair, they chose to resist adversity, find redemption in belief, and be reborn through negation.

Camus' reflections on suicide, primarily outlined in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," encompass both physical and philosophical dimensions [8]. He denies the significance of physical suicide, stating that it represents not a logical conclusion of resistance, but rather the antithesis of resistance. He argues that individuals inevitably encounter suffering and absurdity in life, and to end one's life is to succumb to meaninglessness.

Furthermore, Camus rejects religious suicide, asserting that absurdity arises from the contradiction and conflict between humanity and the world. While others elevate "absurdity" to the status of truth and savior, they overlook its foundation in humanity itself, thereby contradicting themselves. The concept of an afterlife, as the philosophical cornerstone of Christianity, promises redemption in this life and happiness in the afterlife. However, by fixating on the afterlife, individuals spiritually condemn their present existence [9].

Shi Tiesheng, facing illness, contemplated death for hours in the Temple of Heaven, often longing for release through suicide [6]. Yet he realized that external reasons could not explain the root of his suffering. He questioned fate: why must people like us bear such misfortunes? He encountered a profoundly beautiful yet intellectually impaired child and concluded that differences must exist, as they accentuate the brilliance of good things. Since differences are inevitable, suffering is also inevitable, transcending causal logic and human rationality. People cannot find the reason for their suffering; they must accept its inevitability [7].

Apart from the intellectually impaired girl, Shi Tiesheng created many unfortunate characters: a disabled old man in "The Rose of Summer," a child with dwarfism in "Arriving in the Human World," and blind characters in "Strings of Life." Through these characters' reflections, Shi Tiesheng gradually transcended personal suffering to contemplate the universal plight of humanity. The introspection and redemption of humanity as a collective emerge from this shift in thinking.

3.2. Religious Projections with Differences

Both Camus and Shi Tiesheng lacked explicit religious beliefs and identified as atheists. However, their views on religion differed significantly.

Influenced by Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of God," Camus opposed any power that transcended human life and harbored no illusions about the futile. He faithfully advocated for earthly happiness attainable in the present. He argued that Christianity itself is nihilistic, imposing an imagined meaning onto life, thereby hindering the discovery of life's true meaning. In an era where Christianity was a widespread belief, Camus quietly resisted the masses, promoting a survival theory centered on resistance . Dr. Rieux in "The Plague" embodies Camus' spirit, refusing to flee, confronting disaster, and tirelessly saving lives. In contrast, Father Paneloux believes the plague is God's punishment, advocating passive submission to faith [10]. The ultimate victory over the plague

relied not on passive waiting but on hope, courage, and action-- the powers conveyed in this poignant yet authentic epic of struggle.

Unlike Camus, Shi Tiesheng did not adopt a clear stance of "de-religionization" and approached religion with a more inclusive attitude. He did not believe in a conventional sense of "God" or support idolatry. Although he did not acknowledge the existence of "God," he recognized the need for the spiritual solace provided by "divinity." Literature and religion are intimately connected to humanity's struggles and salvation. If literature only focuses on the surface of life without idealistic aspirations and religious sentiments, it will struggle to reach spiritual heights and intellectual depth. Despite the imperfections of this world, under the nurturing of divinity, he was willing to believe in the existence of a perfect otherworld.

In "Notes of a Desultory Writer," he fabricated a scene where the choice of the "Gate of Childhood" determines the different futures of "me," whether to become a hero or a villain, just in a thought. From this perspective, Shi Tiesheng believes that divinity plays a "supervisory" role in human nature, only in this way can evil deeds be punished, and truth, goodness, and beauty can reside in people's hearts. In such a reverse inference, Shi Tiesheng recognized the necessity of the existence of God. In Shi Tiesheng's depiction, the "other shore" can only be viewed from afar and cannot be approached closely, only to be approached but not touched. Because human knowledge and the human world are limited, humanity cannot fully perceive divinity. God only exists in the other shore world because of humanity's painful gaze. The ideal existence of the other shore world is in the infinite distance. People with divinity in their hearts are willing to sacrifice everything for it, finding solace in suffering.

4. Rebellion and Salvation: Emphasizing Collective Resistance

Camus integrates pain into the process of life, and Shi Tiesheng's triumphant journey of life transcends the individual ontology framework, turning the perspective to all humanity, where collective strength becomes particularly important in the process of resistance.

Struggle can only be established within a collective. If one sees others as hell, individual suffering will evolve into a collective plague. Only when people are willing to sacrifice for others can the morality of solidarity be demonstrated.

"The Stranger" is an early work of Camus, where the protagonist, Meursault, acts individually, although pure and honest, he is indeed a passive and inactive figure. In Camus' novel "The Plague," written five years later, a group of proactive characters becomes the protagonists of the novel, raising noble heads to the absurd fate, resisting spiritually and socially. Thus, Camus' philosophy of absurdity and rebellion is completed in both theoretical exposition and image expression, making his "absurd-rebellion" thought process complete.

In Shi Tiesheng's literary narrative, unconventional pronouns reflect his determination to experience the vicissitudes of life among the masses. In "My Distant Qingping Bay," he was deeply touched by the hard living conditions and simple qualities of the people in northern Shaanxi. Therefore, he chose to use the plural pronoun "we" instead of the singular pronoun "I" to depict the hardships of the people in northern Shaanxi, making it feel more intimate, and also sensing the author's spirit of universal love and altruism [11].

Shi Tiesheng believes that resisting suffering is a collective action, and no one can overcome suffering by their efforts alone. We cannot fight against suffering only for ourselves—if there is a lack of care and compassion for others, without a heart of mercy and a spirit of dedication, we will still be afflicted by suffering. In other words, relying solely on individual acceptance of suffering and on willpower to resist suffering will ultimately lead to failure. In the arising and ceasing of all things, salvation can be achieved. Salvation is a deep concern for the joys and sorrows, blessings, and misfortunes of all sentient beings. Isolating a person between life and death, upon careful

consideration, does not have the meaning of life itself. Therefore, isolation implies the cancellation of salvation.

5. Conclusion

This article compares and analyzes the experiences brought by illness and social oppression to Camus and Shi Tiesheng, and also analyzes the paths they took to overcome suffering and negate suicide. Under the projection of different religious thoughts, the two arrived at the same destination, jointly proposing a life-transcending consciousness of collective resistance. Faced with life's unanswered questions, they each handed in their answers. Camus strove to overcome absurdity and, in the process of reflection, calmly and passionately elucidated the issue of human conscience. Shi Tiesheng spent his life expounding his philosophy of death, overcoming physical pain with unwavering determination. The resistance consciousness of these two great figures towards fate has given immense spiritual encouragement to countless suffering groups.

Both rejected death spontaneously but chose different directions under the guidance of God. Camus' "de-religionization" reflects his actively engaged philosophical brilliance. He believes that humans can only rely on themselves, not on gods and nothingness. While Shi Tiesheng, although not a traditional believer, his thoughts occasionally drift towards God or Buddhism, aiming to trace the meaning of life through the forms and transcendence of religion.

Camus and Shi Tiesheng are both practitioners of existentialism. Their souls constantly pursue thought and exploration. Faced with the absurdity of the world and the suffering of life, they deeply understand the existential dilemma of humanity and propose a path that emphasizes life experience and transcends personal limitations in the face of impermanent destiny.

The global epidemic in 2019 has led people to rethink the absurdity of the world. The contradictions between individuals and collectives, life and interests, are becoming increasingly acute. Camus and Shi Tiesheng's call for "individuals can only survive in collectives" echoes the importance of the human destiny community, bringing a new perspective to people's thinking about the pattern of survival space. However, their imperfect consideration of collective destiny has become the direction for successors to explore.

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