

An Interpretation of Faith, Hope, and Love in Western Thought Through the Lens of Contemporary Chinese Literature: A Study of the Implications in Shi Tiesheng's Posthumous Essays

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Abstract: This article delves into the profound spiritual insights within Shi Tiesheng's posthumous prose, drawing comparisons with Western concepts of faith, hope, and love. Shi's works, emerging from his arduous experiences of suffering and disability, transcend the personal to touch on universal human concerns. His contemplations on suffering and the pursuit of faith and hope resonate with Western religious and philosophical thought. His advocacy for these virtues mirrors the Western triad, suggesting a shared human quest for meaning and salvation across cultures. The article explores how Shi's unique life and cultural backdrop informed his writing, bridging Eastern and Western perspectives on human existence and spiritual fulfillment.

Keywords: Shi Tiesheng, culture, Faith, Hope, Love.

1. Introduction

The search for the meaning of human existence is a profound and ubiquitous pursuit in both Eastern and Western cultures. In the article *Bearing the Cross of Suffering: Faith, Hope, and Love in Shi Tiesheng's Posthumous Prose*, the author embarks on a journey to unearth the spiritual treasures Shi Tiesheng unearthed from his own crucible of suffering. This exploration affords us a rare opportunity to peer into how different cultures construe the enigmatic concepts of faith, hope, and love.

Shi Tiesheng's posthumous works are a testament to his grappling with suffering and the elusive notion of redemption. These themes find echoes in the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love that have long held sway in the Western intellectual and spiritual landscape. The *Bible*, particularly in Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, extols these virtues as the bedrock of human spirit and morality. Shi's writings, though rooted in his personal travails of illness and disability, reach out to embrace the common human condition, thereby forging a connection between the disparate worlds of Eastern and Western thought.

This article makes an effort to present a new perspective on Shi Tiesheng's works. It invites an individual to think about how the views from the East and the West regarding suffering and enlightenment converge or differ. Through an examination of Shi's ideas about faith, hope, and love, more profound understandings of the common human longing for meaning can be obtained. This

introduction serves as a springboard for a more in-depth exploration of these themes, highlighting the far-reaching relevance of Shi's work and the nuanced ways in which different cultures mold our fundamental values.

2. Cultural Context: Faith, Hope, and Love

2.1. Eastern Cultural Background

In the rich tapestry of Eastern cultures, faith, hope, and love are intricately intertwined with the ideals of harmony, balance, and enlightenment. Let's take a closer look at how Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism interpret these concepts.

Confucianism posits that faith is the cornerstone of relationships. Confucius, that venerable sage, emphasized that trust is the hallmark of a true gentleman. It's about standing by a person's word and acting in line with what that person says. This trust is the glue that holds society together in harmonious coexistence. Hope in Confucianism is synonymous with personal growth and social responsibility. It enjoins us to engage in ceaseless learning and self-improvement, with the aim of fostering harmony between individuals and society at large. Love, or "ren," in the Confucian lexicon, is about reaching out to others and dwelling in peace. It calls for active participation in society and a genuine concern for the well-being of our fellow human beings. Take a traditional Chinese family as an example. The elders are respected and their words are trusted, and family members support each other, exemplifying the Confucian ideal of harmonious relationships.

Taoism advocates living in harmony with nature and remaining true to oneself. Laozi, the progenitor of Taoism, taught that the most efficacious way to govern is to follow the natural order. In the Taoist worldview, faith is manifested as a profound respect for and adherence to the laws of nature. Hope is construed as an understanding and acceptance of the universe's natural rhythms, flowing with the current to find inner peace and freedom. Taoist love is all-encompassing and unconditional, extending to every living being. It's like when one encounters a wounded bird in the wild, one doesn't interfere but let's nature take its course, respecting the life cycle. Buddhism conceives of faith as a profound belief in the teachings and a devout following of the Buddha. It marks the starting point of one's spiritual odyssey. Hope in Buddhism is the aspiration for liberation and the attainment of nirvana. It involves dedicated practice and deep introspection to discover inner peace. Love, or compassion, in the Buddhist sense, is about selflessly caring for all sentient beings without any expectation of return. Buddhist monks, for instance, often engage in acts of charity such as distributing food to the destitute, embodying the spirit of compassion.

2.2. Western Cultural Background

In the Western cultural milieu, faith, hope, and love are sculpted by the twin forces of Christianity and secular humanism. These concepts pivot around the themes of personal salvation, moral duty, and the pursuit of the greater good.

Christianity defines faith as an unwavering belief in God and the teachings of the *Bible*. It is seen as the pathway to salvation. Christian culture views faith as a steadfast conviction in the divine presence. Hope in Christianity is centered on the anticipation of heaven and eternal life. It is intertwined with the practice of faith and the performance of good deeds. Love, or "agape," is the epitome of unconditional love, encompassing love for God and one's neighbors. This is the very essence of Christian morality, as exemplified by the parable of the Good Samaritan, who extended a helping hand to a stranger in need.

Through the juxtaposition of these cultural perspectives, an individual is able to gain a deeper understanding of the various interpretations of faith, hope, and love. The commonalities and differences can be identified, thereby augmenting the comprehension of Shi Tiesheng's works and

their connection with Western thought. This comparative analysis provides a more comprehensive framework for plumbing the depths of these fundamental human values.

3. Seeing All Suffering and Adversity

Three years after Shi Tiesheng's passing, I delved into the Special Edition of Shi Tiesheng's Posthumous Works published in 2012. Compiled by his wife Chen Ximi, this collection contains approximately 85,000 words of diverse writings, including an unpublished essay, short stories, and correspondence with luminaries like Wang Anyi and Wang Shuo, along with an unfinished magnum opus comprising four essays. Engaging with these works is like embarking on a profound journey through Shi Tiesheng's inner world, where we encounter his profound insights on life and death, and his perennial musings on faith, hope, and love, as well as his poignant final confessions.

The *Heart Sutra* in Buddhism proclaims that when Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva attains deep wisdom, he perceives the emptiness of all phenomena and transcends suffering[1]. However, in the real world, suffering is an inescapable reality. Shi Tiesheng, during his long sojourn on the sickbed, came to the realization that suffering is an inherent part of the human condition. He astutely observed that life seldom offers the promise of an end to suffering. Through his in-depth study of Christian and Buddhist scriptures, he discerned that life is replete with suffering. He even ventured to suggest that the fundamental difference between the two religions lies in their divergent perspectives on suffering.

In his *Letter to Wang Shuo*, Shi Tiesheng posited that the Christian God, from the very inception of creation, did not bestow upon humanity a life free from suffering. In contrast, Buddhism's Four Noble Truths expound that suffering encompasses not only physical pain but also the labyrinth of psychological anguish. Shi Tiesheng's own life was a protracted battle with disability and illness. He wryly referred to his illness as his "job" and writing as his "hobby." [2]His life experiences became the crucible in which his thoughts on suffering were forged. When one reflects on a time of personal setback, it is precisely then that an understanding and appreciation of Shi Tiesheng's perspective can take root. It is apparent that, as with him, humanity must confront the reality of suffering in life.

The light of Christ and the incense in Buddhist temples are both symbolic of humanity's age-old quest to alleviate the world's suffering. Shi Tiesheng, despite his own afflictions, used his pen to peel back the layers of the world's essence.[3] In his later works, he emerged as a rationalist, commencing with his own disability and plumbing the depths of themes such as death, desire, faith, and meaning. Simultaneously, he harbored an idealistic streak, seeking the wellspring of strength to propel him forward in the face of death. His pain metamorphosed into a spiritual wellspring, and his works are suffused with faith, hope, and love. It is reminiscent of the biblical dictum that faith, hope, and love abide, with love reigning supreme. [4]

4. Faith: The Theme of Day and Night Reflections - "Blessed Are Those Who Believe Without Seeing"

Shi Tiesheng's posthumous works are a profound exploration of the theme of believing without seeing. He ruminated deeply on life, death, love, and faith, and his works are a testament to his wisdom. [5]We are left with an indelible image of him in his wheelchair beneath the cypress tree at the Temple of Earth. Scholar Zhao Yiheng astutely noted that Shi Tiesheng was a singular figure[5]. He did not shy away from the need for redemption. [6]His work *Day and Night* compels us to confront the question of faith. It argues that it is of paramount importance to believe, whether one gravitates towards Christianity or Buddhism. In the face of life's vicissitudes, we must engage in introspection and seek a path to self-salvation. His works vividly demonstrate that faith can be a beacon of hope during suffering.

The magnum opus *Reflections and Thoughts: My Experience with Shi Tiesheng* is a complex tapestry woven from personal reflections and creative expression. It revisits and reinterprets the themes of faith, hope, and love with a reflective lens. The section *Life, or the Eternal Desire* commences with a vivid metaphor for life. Shi Tiesheng hypothesized that life springs from desire, a primal force that he regarded as a natural and essential part of being human. He was not content with belief systems that sought to suppress desire. Instead, he believed in something that transcended suffering. He did not adhere dogmatically to any religion but held a unique and personal view of God. He posited that faith is essentially the belief in the unseen. He contended that while science endeavors to unravel the mysteries of the world through empirical means, faith is about embracing the unknowable. Shi Tiesheng called for a dual embrace of *Day and Night*, indicating that an individual must make a conscious determination about what to believe in life for the discovery of faith. [7] Commonly, a person may find themselves in situations demanding trust in the unseen, as in the face of an uncertain future. It is then that the strength of having faith in something transcending the immediately visible is understood.

5. Aspiration: The Wisdom of Rotary Inquiry — "It embodies the true essence of faith and the path of the believer."

In his *Letters to Wang Shuo*, Shi Tiesheng candidly addressed the lacunae in the Chinese context of faith. He expressed his longing for a definitive paradise, yet he was acutely aware of the elusiveness of such a goal. In *Day and Night*, he expounded that the pursuit of perfection in life is an unending and passionate odyssey. The concept of *Aspiration* serves as a guiding light on the path to faith. It is a process fraught with hope and the promise of discovery.

In *Me and Shi Tiesheng*, it is averred that a person is perpetually on a journey. If faith is conceived as the ultimate destination, then aspiration is the arduous yet rewarding path that leads there. Shi Tiesheng believed that human pursuit, molded by suffering, is an infinite quest. He held that God's mercy is manifested in the fact that as long as people continue to move forward, a path will always unfold before us[3]. In his works, he posited that faith is intrinsically tied to a hopeful journey. His work *Memories and Reflections* delves into the realm of childhood desires. These nascent desires are emblematic of the journey of faith and hope, a process that demands effort and creative engagement. In his poem *Relics*, he poetically described longing as a vast expanse like the sky or an unending road. It is a journey that, despite the seemingly insurmountable distance between humanity and the divine, is of inestimable value. Shi Tiesheng argued that the path perspective of paradise is more salutary than the arrival perspective.[8] The former compels us to strive for truth, goodness, and beauty. When an individual sets out to achieve a long-term objective, for example running a marathon, the experience is often remembered. The process is laden with difficulties, but each step acts as proof of aspiration. It is a journey that not only challenges physical capabilities but also reinforces the conviction in the force of perseverance, akin to what Shi Tiesheng is striving to express.

6. Love: The Redemption of a Troubled Life — Only the Vast and Profound Desire for Love Is the Salvation

That People Can Hope For Faith and hope are like the twin oars of a traveler's boat, propelling us forward on a journey that demands a clear destination and purposeful steps. Shi Tiesheng, in his essay *Desire to Be*, emphasized the pivotal role of love in the realm of faith. In his letter to Wang Anyi, he expounded that love is fundamentally about caring for others. He believed that as our capacity for care expands, so does our vision of the world. The Christian concept of love left an indelible imprint on his thinking, leading him to conclude that love could be the balm that soothes the wounds of suffering.

Shi Tiesheng posited that in the face of suffering, individuals have a choice between resentment and love. Love, he argued, is the gateway to faith and dignity. [3]It is an aspiration that springs from the depths of the soul. His early work *Me and the Earth Altar* marked the inception of his exploration of love. He regarded love as the antidote to human imperfection. He further posited that love is a responsibility bestowed upon us by a higher power, a series of sublime acts that enriches the fabric of life. He distinguished between universal love as an ideal and romantic love as a tangible manifestation of that ideal. Romantic love, in his view, has the power to unlock the hidden chambers of our souls. He also found solace in Nietzsche's concept of *Amor Fati*, regarding loving fate as the apotheosis of love. Love assumes a crucial significance precisely because we are all mired in suffering and yearn for connection with others. In his work *Day and Night*, he averred that love should be directed outward, towards others. It is the bulwark that enables us to confront suffering and death. Shi Tiesheng's works are a poignant testament to his love, faith, and hope. His works are like a spiritual pilgrimage, where his suffering is transmuted into a wellspring of spiritual nourishment. A time may be remembered when an act of selfless love was observed within the community. A neighbor came to the aid of an elderly person in need, and that unassuming act brought about an awareness of the transformative potency of love. It provoked more profound contemplation on how love can genuinely serve as a wellspring of salvation in a tumultuous world.[7]

7. Conclusion

This article has meticulously examined Shi Tiesheng's posthumous works, unearthing a profound nexus between his oeuvre and Western concepts of faith, hope, and love. Shi Tiesheng's works, born of his personal suffering, are a profound meditation on these universal themes, forging a connection with Western thought. Through a comparative analysis of Eastern and Western perspectives, we have gained a more nuanced understanding of these concepts. Shi Tiesheng's works are a testament to his acute awareness of suffering and his unwavering pursuit of spiritual values. The significance of faith, especially the belief in the unseen, emerges as a central tenet. Aspiration is revealed as the ongoing journey towards faith, and love is posited as the panacea for human suffering. Overall, Shi Tiesheng's works offer invaluable insights into the human condition and the perennial quest for meaning. They serve as a bridge between Eastern and Western worldviews, inviting us to reflect on our own lives and beliefs. They encourage us to embark on a journey of exploration into the spiritual dimensions of our existence, to seek answers to the profound questions that have haunted humanity since time immemorial.

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