

On the Literary Healing Nature of Shi Tiesheng's The Temple of Earth and Me

Yuting Li^a

^a School of Literature and Education, Shaanxi University of International Trade and Commerce

Received 20 March 2026, Revised 21 April 2026, Accepted 19 June 2026

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore how Shi Tiesheng realizes the redemption of fate through literature. How does Shi Tiesheng clarify the contingency of his own experience through writing? How does his work realize the redemption of fate? This paper focuses on the representative works such as *Me* and *Ditan*, and analyzes the expressions such as natural picture, fate meditation and philosophical thinking beyond suffering, and explores how its words become readers' spiritual support and spiritual comfort, thus demonstrating the inherent tenacity and transcendence of human spirit.

Design/Methodology/Approach – With the help of text close reading and literature method, this paper analyzes the spiritual core hidden in Shi Tiesheng's natural writing and fatalistic reflection.

Findings – It is found that works such as *Me* and *Ditan* integrate natural landscape, philosophical speculation and suffering transcendence, releasing unique healing power. They not only awaken the readers to examine their own living conditions, but also illuminate their inner difficulties and arouse deep resonance, and give them a calm and lasting spiritual comfort.

Research Implications – This discussion not only broadens the horizon of destiny redemption and spiritual healing in Shi Tiesheng's research, but also deepens the rational cognition of spiritual toughness and acceptance mentality in literary texts. It also provides a new way for readers to seek spiritual comfort, and has reference significance for literary creation and interpretation with life care and healing functions.

Keywords: Shi Tiesheng; The Temple of Earth and me; Life experience; Healing

JEL Classifications: Z11,Z13,I31

Financial source: This paper is supported by the following projects at Shaanxi University of International Trade and Commerce: "The Science and Technology Innovation Team for the Dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine Scientific Culture" (2025KCTD06); "A Course on the TCM Theory of Concurrent Treatment of Heart and Brain" (Chinese-English Edition) (SMXK22202503).

^a Associate professor, School of Literature and Education, Shaanxi University of International Trade & Commerce, China

First Author, E-mail: 353863844@qq.com

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I. Introduction

Healing is the process of helping individuals or groups gradually recover from trauma, illness, or imbalance through physical, psychological, or spiritual interventions, ultimately restoring a sense of wholeness, happiness, and belonging. This concept originated from medicine. In the 4th century BC, Hippocrates proposed the idea of "*vis medicatrix naturae*," meaning that nature itself possesses a restorative force. By the 1940s, psychologist Carl Jung adapted this notion into psychoanalysis, emphasizing the role of symbols and stories in healing. By the late 1970s, Aaron Antonovsky further identified three key elements for healing: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. Later, Michael White integrated these ideas into narrative therapy, suggesting that by retelling one's story, individuals can assign new meaning to past experiences. Over time, healing theory evolved beyond medicine, becoming an interdisciplinary applied practice utilized in psychology, sociology, literature, history, and art studies. Today, its influence extends to literary criticism and cultural studies. In 1995, Ye Shuxian, a scholar of literary anthropology, introduced the term "literary therapy," proposing that literary narratives inherently possess therapeutic effects. Take Shi Tiesheng and his work **I and the Temple of Earth** as an example. The piece conveys profound inner pain, unguarded vulnerability, and ultimately, reconciliation and acceptance, offering solace to many. Through writing, Shi Tiesheng essentially rediscovered himself, using narrative to re-examine his life, affirm his existence, and inspire courage and hope in others.. As Han Shaogong poignantly observed: "Shi Tiesheng was a miracle of life—unyielding and noble through decades in a wheelchair, a literary peak whose imagination and intellect continually redefined contemporary spiritual heights. His warmth resonated with millions, allowing fleeting moments to touch eternity, minute particles to expand into boundlessness, and hardship to dissolve into a heartfelt, magnanimous smile." (Han Shaogong , 2016) This tribute not only honors Shi Tiesheng's personal resilience but also reveals how his work mirrors humanity's fragility and eternal pursuit of goodness and beauty.

II. The Literary Journey of Shi Tiesheng

Like the educated youth of that era, Shi Tiesheng was determined to leave a poem of struggle on the barren land of northern Shaanxi. However, at his prime, he suffered from a latent spinal cord disease due to a severe cold, which ultimately left him paralyzed in both legs and hovering on the brink of life and death. In the darkest moments of life, Shi Tiesheng had too many questions and reflections, making writing a necessity within his abilities.. Shi Tiesheng stated, "At twenty, my legs were crippled. Besides painting decorative eggs for others, I thought I should do something else. After changing my mind several times, I finally decided to write," as if "writing could rescue the disabled from their predicament" (Shi Tiesheng, 2011). "When friends left in the evening, under the solitary yet clamorous light of the small desk lamp, I began to think of writing something. That was the initial sprouting of my creative desire. For a moment, I forgot about death" (Shi Tiesheng, 2011). Forgetting death meant confronting how to live and what to live for. He channeled his inner turmoil, defiance

against fate's injustice, and the search for self-salvation and survival into words, thus opening a new path. He immersed himself in fiction and prose, refining the crystalline essence of thought from the ore of physical disability during his long companionship with illness and the wheelchair. Through an alchemy of language, he transformed trauma and soothed emotions, using poetic sensibility and wisdom to reconstruct the meaning of life, ultimately achieving an artistic pinnacle in contemporary Chinese literature where writing became synonymous with existence itself.

I and the Temple of Earth, immensely influential among scholars and readers, has become a classic of contemporary literature due to its profound exploration of illness, suffering, fate, existence, God, and value. Every word in the essay expresses Shi Tiesheng's self-discovery and affirmation of being, and more importantly, his reconstruction of meaning through words and literature—revealing a man gradually accepting, reconciling, and healing deep within his soul. He wrote: "Once a person is born, this is no longer a debatable question but a fact given by God; when God hands us this fact, He has incidentally guaranteed its outcome. So death is not something to be rushed; death is a festival that will inevitably arrive. Thinking this way, I felt much more at ease; everything before me no longer seemed so terrifying" and "I felt grateful for such an arrangement" (Shi Tiesheng, 2011). Moving from resentment and pain over his own plight, to articulating the interplay of fate's necessity and contingency, and finally ascending to religious inquiries about the human condition, Shi Tiesheng gradually came to perceive God's arrangement and wisdom. The boundaries of his narrative expanded, rising to the height of human philosophy. Works like *I and the Temple of Earth*, *Autumn Reminiscence*, *Grandma's Star*, and *The Year I Was Twenty-One* not only reveal the author's profound understanding of life's essence and his reconciliation with disability and adversity but also embody the redemption of life itself. Their depth of thought and magnanimity have deeply moved countless readers. Professor Sun Yu noted, "The long-dormant spiritual currents of humanity surge forth here; all people with free will can feel a sense of intimacy and solace in his voice. Shi Tiesheng gained friends through his solitude" (Sun Yu. 1998), pointing directly to the quality of his literary creation being isomorphic with life itself, even with the human condition. Through profound questioning, relentless pursuit, and ultimately offering answers and solace, Shi Tiesheng's literary creation became an ideal pathway for healing.

III. Healing in Literature

Starting from his own physical disability, Shi Tiesheng embarked on a profound reflection on the fragility and intrinsic value of life. In his works, especially in essays and novels such as "Me and the Temple of Earth," he not only candidly confronts his own suffering, but also elevates this personal experience of pain into a reflection on the universal human condition. Through delicate and restrained writing, we lead readers into lives shrouded in disease or suffering, allowing us to see that suffering is not the end, but rather the beginning of growth and transcendence. He uses the tension between his deteriorating physical condition and increasingly enriched spiritual life to reveal the fragility and resilience that life possesses simultaneously. In the long years

of wheelchair life, he realized the repetition and power of life from every blade of grass and every tree on the altar, and experienced the continuation of love from his mother's silent dedication and the sincere response of readers.

Shi Tiesheng did not avoid pain, but chose writing as a way of contemplation and resistance - he transformed physical confinement into spiritual freedom and reconstructed a wilderness for the soul to wander in with language. It is through this literary self reconstruction that he shows us that the value of life lies not in its length or completeness, but in how it carries infinite meaning in its finite form. He refuses to romanticize disability or indulge in self pity, but instead examines existence with a calm and warm gaze, conveying a power rooted in reality but oriented towards light. Therefore, reading Shi Tiesheng's words not only makes us feel the weight of life, but also gives us the courage to start anew - he teaches us how to love life while accepting limitations. This kind of spiritual healing from the inside out not only concerns individuals, but also becomes a public spiritual resource, inspiring generation after generation of readers to find meaning and live to the fullest in their respective difficulties.

First, Shi Tiesheng uses fine brushwork to depict the vibrant vitality of nature across the four seasons: "The whole garden was filled with the rustling sounds of competing to grow." (Shi Tiesheng, 2011) The mild natural scenery becomes an important medium for his emotional sustenance and spiritual healing. Of course, his descriptions of nature in *The Temple of Earth* do not simply reproduce natural beauty; they are infused with profound insights into life. "In the pervasive, tranquil light, one can more easily see time and catch sight of one's own figure." Here, Shi Tiesheng not only witnesses the revival of spring, the lushness of summer, the falling leaves of autumn, and the white snow of winter, but also comes to understand fate and God: "In a densely populated city, to have such a quiet place to retreat to seems like God's thoughtful arrangement." (Shi Tiesheng, 2011) Through his depictions of nature, he conveys a serenity and harmony that transcend individual suffering, allowing readers to feel a soothing calmness in their reading. He regards nature as the embodiment of life's forces, seeking meaning and value in life through dialogue with nature. "So, for fifteen years, I have always returned to that ancient garden—to sit in silence beneath its old trees, by its withered grass, or beside its crumbling walls; to let my thoughts settle, to push aside the noise around me and straighten my tangled mind, to peer into my own soul." (Shi Tiesheng, 2011) In the tranquility of *The Temple of Earth* and the rhythm of nature, he finds an opportunity and space for inner dialogue. This dialogue is not only a reflection on his own life experiences but also a profound exploration of the essence of life. "If there were no suffering in the world, could the world still exist? Without stupidity, what glory would wisdom have? ... So it seems we must accept suffering—the entire drama of humanity requires it, existence itself requires it." (Shi Tiesheng, 2011) Shi Tiesheng finally realizes that the path to redemption from all unfortunate fates lies in acceptance and transcendence, in the equality of all beings.

Second, by accepting the impermanence of life and transcending suffering, Shi Tiesheng reminds us to face life's ups and downs squarely and to rebuild the value and meaning of life. He believes that suffering is part of life, inescapable, yet it can be overcome through inner transformation and spiritual elevation. "The universe, with its unceasing desire, refines a song and dance into eternity. What human name this desire goes by is of

little consequence.” (Shi Tiesheng, 2011) In accepting life’s impermanence, he finds the courage and strength to face suffering. As he writes in *Designing Good Fortune*: “You perceive life through color, grasp space through form, smell the flow of time in lines, and discover the cries of living beings where heaven and earth meet. You are a fortunate person, because you are truly lucky; thus you prostrate yourself before the creativity of nature, offering your awe and gratitude, while Heaven bestows upon you an unyielding and endless creative passion.” (Shi Tiesheng, 2011) Through such contemplation and inquiry, Shi Tiesheng achieves reconciliation with himself, with fate, and with the God who arranges all things. He then transmits this process of reconciliation through his words to readers, inspiring them to seek hope in adversity and find a path toward inner peace.

In *The Temple of Earth and Me*, Shi Tiesheng amidst the torment of pain, questioning, and resentment, gradually comes to his disability, comprehends a new life, courageously transcends it, and transforms it into spiritual wealth, striving to condense it into the stature of a fully realized human being. Using his own experience, he tells readers that suffering is not the entirety of life but an opportunity for growth and self-transcendence. Thus, readers feel an awakening and enlightenment—just as Hemingway said, “A man can be destroyed but not defeated”—and thereby experience release from pent-up emotions and spiritual comfort. Therefore, the Temple of Earth, a place laden with history and culture, becomes the stage on which Shi Tiesheng confronts suffering, contemplates life, and stands up again. In this work, every encounter with the Temple of Earth, every dialogue, every inner struggle and moment of release is narrated with gentle clarity. He writes, “When life proves its value in the form of beauty, happiness is enjoyment, and pain is also enjoyment.” (Shi Tiesheng, 2014) Every time he comes to the Temple of Earth, “it seems this ancient garden has been waiting for me, enduring centuries of vicissitudes just to wait.” In his dialogue with the Temple of Earth, he finds the courage and strength to face suffering, a strength that allows him to view life’s disappointments with detachment. This feeling lets him momentarily forget physical pain and life’s hardships, allowing him to enjoy a tranquility, harmony, and sense of connection, thereby achieving spiritual healing.

Shi Tiesheng further explores the transformation and transcendence of suffering through fictional characters and stories in his works. He creates a series of figures who face suffering yet remain tenacious: the husband whose body is stiff, as if nailed in place by fate, yet still gazes out the window every day, feeling the world’s warmth with his eyes; the young man who loves to sing and, even after losing a leg, still leans on his crutch at the alley entrance humming a broken but vibrant tune; the person who sits alone drinking at dusk, the silent stone-like man catching birds at the edge of the city, and the pretty but intellectually disabled siblings who always hold hands. These characters do not wallow in pathos; instead, with an almost simple composure, they knead suffering into their daily lives, piecing together a complete posture of existence from shards. Through their experiences and inner growth, Shi Tiesheng reveals to readers that suffering is not the end of life but often becomes the starting point for understanding love, dignity, and hope. His characters do not shout or protest; in silence, they complete a solemn self-transcendence. These stories are not grand, yet they allow many readers to touch the astonishing power hidden within ordinary human—a stubbornness that grows toward the light even in the cracks. For this reason, they transcend the page and quietly enter readers’ realities, inspiring countless ordinary people, in the face of life’s difficulties, not to yield or languish, but to maintain a deep-seated positivity

and brightness.

IV. Renewal through Healing

Starting from his own physical disability, Shi Tiesheng launches a profound meditation on the fragility and intrinsic value of life. In his works, especially prose pieces like *The Temple of Earth and Me* and his novels, he not only frankly confronts his own suffering but also elevates this personal pain into a contemplation of the universal human condition. Through delicate and restrained prose, Shi Tiesheng leads readers into the inner worlds of those shrouded by illness and fate, showing us that suffering is not the end but rather possibly the beginning of understanding and the starting point of transcendence. Through the tension between his deteriorating physical condition and his increasingly rich spiritual life, he reveals life's simultaneous fragility and resilience. Over his long years in a wheelchair, he learns from every plant and tree in the Temple of Earth, from the cycle of seasons, the rhythms of life's renewal; from his mother's silent devotion and readers' sincere responses, he experiences love's continuity.

He deeply understands life's impermanence and brevity, a realization derived from his long struggle with illness and profound reflection on existence. In *The Temple of Earth and Me*, he writes: "God never bestows the word 'happiest' on anyone; He places an eternal distance before everyone's desires and fairly gives limits to each person." (Shi Tiesheng, 2011) This statement not only reveals his understanding of the fairness of fate but also his acceptance of human limitations. By continuously opening up and scrutinizing through his writing, he deeply explores his inner world, thereby profoundly discovering life's meaning and value—not by escaping suffering, but by embracing it to achieve transcendence. "Fate pushes me to the edge of a cliff; I will sit down here and sing a song for you." These calm and steadfast expressions stem from his most authentic experiences of life, facing life's challenges and accidents with a detached attitude. In challenges, he not only discovers human potential and wisdom but also learns to find hope in despair and create infinity within limitations. This reverence and love for life, this unique understanding of transforming and transcending suffering, not only inspires himself but also deeply moves every reader. His words provide spiritual comfort and support, becoming a motivating force for people facing life's difficulties and seeking meaning in life, allowing countless individuals to see a beam of light in darkness and walk more courageously on their life's journey.

V. Conclusion

Through the power of literature, Shi Tiesheng's works demonstrate the resilience of the human spirit and the possibility of transcending suffering. His words are not merely records of personal experience but a profound exploration of life's meaning, a calm reflection on suffering, and a candid acceptance and spiritual release from the vicissitudes of fate. With plain yet philosophically rich prose, he elevates individual disability and pain

into a contemplation of universal human life, giving private memories the thickness of public significance. In representative works such as *The Temple of Earth and Me* and *Fictive Notes*, Shi Tiesheng, through ordinary yet intensely vital characters—whether the silently enduring mother or the strangers encountered by chance in the Temple of Earth—provides models for us to persist in faith and guard dignity in adversity. These characters are not heroes, yet they ignite hope in the most authentic way, showing us that human beings can maintain spiritual brightness even in extreme circumstances.

Through the power of literature, Shi Tiesheng's works demonstrate the resilience of the human spirit and the possibility of transcending suffering. His words are not merely records of personal experience but an exploration of life's meaning, a profound reflection on suffering, and a candid acceptance and release from the whims of fate. His delicate depictions of nature, his continuous reflection on life experiences, and his dialogue with and transcendence of suffering not only accomplish his own spiritual redemption but also provide readers with a new perspective for facing life's difficulties and seeking life's meaning. He teaches us that suffering is not the opposite of life but a part of life; the value of life is not about whether one stands in the light, but about whether one can still orient oneself toward the light while in darkness. His words are composed and affectionate, possessing metaphysical reflection yet never losing warmth and compassion for the human world. Therefore, Shi Tiesheng and his literary existence make literature truly a warm light that cares for life and human existence. His works transcend time and will continue to inspire generations of readers to move forward bravely on the path of seeking the true meaning of life.

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