

Albert Camus in China

While his fame and his profound influence were reaching out to the whole world in the 20th century, Albert Camus had to face his late arrival in modern China. For a China that was deeply mired in the domestic conflicts and foreign invasions in the first half of the last century and for the Chinese intellectuals struggling in a time out of joint, Camus's Sisyphus Question that explored all the aspects of human existence in an age of peace and his sense of outsidership were too untimely. However, for a China that had been closed to the outside world for more than thirty years and for her people who had survived the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Great Starvation in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, any modernistic writings on absurdity and anti-absurdity or nihilism and anti-nihilism would better portray their spiritual predicament and pursuit than the classics. Accordingly, around the beginning of the 1980s when modern Western literary works were rushing into China, Camus's rise in the Chinese horizon turned out to be timely.

I. Introduction, Translation and Publication of Camus in China

There were two modes for the reception of Camus in Mainland China. In philosophy, he was cited as a representative of existentialism and was introduced to the Chinese academia soon after Sartre. In literature, Camus as a Nobel Prize winner as well as a representative of absurdism, started to be widely admired by Chinese writers and scholars.

In October 1979, Feng Hanlv published his *Camus and Absurdism* in “Materials for Foreign Literature Research”. Although it cannot prove to be the first Chinese introductory writing on Camus after the Cultural Revolution, it could at least suggest that the introduction of him was in pace with that of other most influential modern Western writers. In 1980, Gu Fangji and Xu Zhiren’s co-translation of his *The Plague* that would soon win wide applause for the author was issued by Shanghai Translation Publishing House in its *Series of Foreign Arts*. Over the next year, both Meng An’s translation of his *The Outsider* and Zheng Kelu’s translation of his *Silent Men* encountered Chinese readers via the second volume of Yuan Kejia’s *Anthology of Modern Foreign Works*, whose total circulation reached as high as 68,500 when it was printed for the third time four years later. Once the significant role that each series played in triggering the reception of modern Western literature and the birth of the new Chinese literary school in the 1980s is considered, Camus’s influence could easily be estimated.

The full Chinese version of Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* did not come out until 1987 when Du Xiaozhen, a professor of philosophy at Peking University, had his translation published with Sanlian Press in its *Series of New Knowledge*. This booklet, plain as its binding is, has since then been exerting its influence upon the Chinese writers and scholars with its philosophical wisdom and critical spirit so that even today, allusions or references to Sisyphusian spirit could still be detected in some Chinese academic or literary writings. In 1989, *Between the Sunshine and Misery*, an anthology of Du Xiaozhen and Gu Jiachen’s translation of Camus’s early essay *The Two Sides of the Coin*, and the major chapters of his *The Rebel*, was presented by Shanghai Sanlian Press in its

Owl's Treasury Series and revised and published twice in the 1990s.

In July 1985, *The Just Assassins* that consisted of Li Yumin's translation of *Caligula*, *The Misunderstanding* and the title play was included in Liu Mingjiu's *Series of 20th Century French Literature* and was published by Lijiang Press. Less circulated and less influential though, it also took its place in the collections of literary fans.

Camus's major novels are highly popular among Chinese readers. In 1998, Yilin Press published *The Outsider* that included Guo Hong'an's translation of *The Outsider*, *The Fall*, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and three relevant critical essays. The Chinese revision of *The Plague* and Yuan Li and Zhou Xiaoshan's co-translation of his posthumous *The First Man* were respectively published by the same press in 1997 and 1999.

In 2000, the new Yilin edition of *The Plague and The Outsider* was published and its 2001 hard-covered *Camus's Works* also included the fictions aforementioned. Later, Du Xiaozhen's version of *The Myth of Sisyphus* was re-published respectively by Guangxi Normal University Press, Economic Daily Press, Xiyuan Press and Tianjin People's Press. In 2003, an illustrated version of *The Myth of Sisyphus* was produced by Shanxi Normal University Press to cater for the young readers in China.

All these scattered activities contributed much to Camus's popularity among Chinese readers and researchers. Nevertheless, the most important event that advanced the reception of Camus was to be marked by the 2002 publication of *The Complete Works of*

Albert Camus. This four-volume set, edited by Liu Mingjiu and published by Hebei Education Press, included one volume of Camus's fictions, one volume of his plays and two volumes of his essays. For this new collection, translators like Liu Mingjiu, Li Yumin, Ding Shizhong and Wang Dianzhong, were invited to translate all of Camus's plays and his political and literary essays and to retranslate *The Outsider* and *The Plague*. Such was the culmination of the introduction and translation of Camus in China and received great critical claims. The first edition had a printing of 5,000 copies and was sold out soon, which was the best confirmation of Camus's timeliness for China. In other words, after he set his feet on this land in 1980, Camus had to go through another twenty-three years to present the whole picture of himself to the Chinese reading public and critics.

II. Studies and Reception of Camus in China

Ever since the author was introduced into China, much has been devoted to Camus studies in this country. Most of the relevant critical essays have been published on such journals as "Foreign Literature Review", "Foreign Literature Studies", "Foreign Arts", and "French Literature". Scholastically, he is closely analyzed, interpreted and reconstructed. The recent years also witness the increase of the number of the Chinese MA theses and PhD dissertations on Camus. By now, two books that comprehensively study his thoughts have been published, i.e., *Metaphysical Struggles—A Study of Camus's Ideology* and *Camus's New Humanist Philosophy*. In 1992, the Chinese version of *Camus* by an anonymous Irish writer was included by China Social Science Press in its *Series of Famous Foreign Thinkers* but this sketch-like booklet that consisted of about one hundred pages aroused little attention. However, the 1997 publication of R. Grenier's *Albert*

Camus: Soleil et ombre and the 1999 publication of Herbert R Lottman's *Albert Camus* provided more valuable sources on the life and creation of Camus for the Chinese readers. The Chinese edition of Richard Kamber's *On Camus* that was published by Zhonghua Book Company in 2002 also gave a brief account of the religious origin and historical development of his philosophy. In April 2005, only one month after the publication of its French version in France, the Chinese version of Ronald Aronson's *Camus & Sartre* was presented by East China Normal University Press. For Chinese readers, it was a most meaningful solution to the enigma of the collapse of the friendship between these two giants. In 2007, Beijing Sanlian Press published Guo Hong'an's *From Montaigne to Camus—Reconstructing the Reading Space of French Literature*. This book, with one quarter of its length on the translation, reading and criticism of Camus, soon won extensive recognition among the Chinese fans of French literature.

While the studies of Camus's philosophy and aesthetics is advancing in university education and research, a question that remains to be answered is whether his style and temperament have extended their substantial influence to cotemporary Chinese literature. For this, no satisfactory answer seems to have been found. Most of the writers, who are over-haunted by their motives of patricide in their writing or anxiety of influence, are unwilling to clarify the sources of their literary works. Of course, the ambiguity itself is understandable since authors always find themselves indebted to varied origins.

Liu Jianhua once compared and contrasted A Cheng's *King of Chess* with Camus's *The Outsider* and his conclusion was that both of these two works were "serious absurdist

philosophic fictions” that were “viewing the world through panes or re-examining it in a philosophically detached way.” According to Liu, these two fictions also shared a lot of similarities in the themes, life experience of their heroes and their attitudes towards life: “Their heroes were not demonstrating the logics of real life through their actions, but in a casual, weary and even idiotic manner, conveying to us their attitudes towards life—not the concrete living conditions but the short life that universally exists for us; not the objective world, but the nihilities of time and space.” Syntactically, each employed concise, incoherent and unmodified sentences to suggest the both absurd starting point for the outsiders to view the world and the absurd world itself, in which nothing was rational and nothing had its own aim. Nevertheless, the critic asserted, “we cannot hastily conclude that A Cheng was particularly influenced by Camus’s art or philosophy or that he was copying or imitating Camus. On the contrary, we are more convinced that contemporary Chinese literature has found its own specific circumstance and ground that are essentially similar to those for contemporary world literature. It was not in its superficial imitation of Camus but in its distinctive root-seeking that A Cheng’s fiction unfolded the existential absurdity in Camus’s *The Outsider*”. Such were the echoes of time and fate; such were the resemblance and fusion between contemporary Chinese writers and Camus.

According to Zhu Dake’s notion of “Camus-Du Xiaozheng Style”, the Chinese avant-garde writers were the first to be influenced by this style. Likewise, as Li Jie argued in his *A Memorandum of Chinese Literature in the 1980s*, “Not Márquez or Borges, but Kafka and Camus were the first 20th century modernistic writers who arrived in post Culutural Revolution China.” Sun Ganlu, a Chinese writer, recalled in his *This is*

Where My Home Is, “I vaguely remembered it was in an afternoon break that I was reading Camus on a folding chair in a post office...the rods of a passing tram scrubbing the wires with a rustling sound, I began to have a faint vision of Shanghai, a sketch that was being extended and revised in the realm of sounds”. Twenty years later, when China was confronted with the Sars Crisis in 2003, Sun was still urging his readers to go back to Camus. “Great Camus found the absurdity of the world through the plague, but the fashionable people are finding fashion through Sars”, said the author in his *What Should You Reader When You Are Coughing*. Professor Wu Xiaodong, as he was reflecting upon his early writing career in the 1980s, said, “The essays Camus wrote in his twenties were the great examples for my writing. Although they were immature, the essays I wrote at that time were unique.” And Ma Yuan put *The Outsider* and *The Plague* on his required reading list. When talking about the techniques Camus used in *The Outsider*, he said, “Camus was so calm in this fiction that no emotion was revealed. His language was plain and indifferent and most of the sentences in the fiction were concise. We could hardly see how the characters were thinking. Travail as they may have been, all the details had their significance—the prevalent calmness and self-restraint kept a very firm hand on the author’s feelings and emotions.” In a more subjective reading, we could even detect the Camusian presence in Yu Hua’s works. As Zhu Dake summarized, “Camus, Márquez, Rilke, Calvino, Hemingway and Kundera, by constituting the discourse for the self-renovation of contemporary Chinese literature, left intellectual narrative and clues of stylistic revolution in the literary history. The Camusian sentences are often found in many avant-garde texts. They are the disseminated fragments of the shells crushed by the cultural barriers, indicating the slim trace of Camus’s oriental trip.”

What is noteworthy is the Chinese staging of Francis Huster's *The Plague*, a monadrama adapted from Camus's namesake fiction. It was successfully presented in 1996, the Year of the Rat for China, by Shanghai Modernists' Dramatic Society in its cooperation with the Cultural Office of the French Consulate in Shanghai with Zhao Yi'ou, a celebrated actor as the sole role-player. In 2008, another Year of the Rat, it was restaged by the same dramatic society in the celebration of its 15th anniversary with a new role-player, Tian Li, a young actor of great performing talent; this play was ardently applauded by young audiences, with the theater fully packed for fifteen times successively.

In France, Camus is called "the conscience of the intellectuals" and "the spiritual mentor for the youth." We cannot draw an inference that he is playing the same role in China. Through their comparison between Camus and Lu Xun, some Chinese readers have found that both of these two authors have the similar spirit that rebels against despair and resolves to awaken the people from their spiritual paralysis, thus giving the reader the courage to be. All in all, any influence or reception should be embodied by individual experiences. To influence someone is to inspire and stimulate him or her. Whether we have received Camus's existentialist philosophy and his rebellious spirit depends on our own action. In addition, there are two types of influence, explicit or implicit. Sometimes, we are unconsciously influenced and on some peculiar occasions, someone's words or their actions may suddenly flash in our mind and lead us to a vital decision. Choice and freedom, love and commitment, absurdity and struggle, existence and dignity—all are the universal Camusian questions that reflect upon the essence of life, and the paradoxes of

existence that challenge people of different nations and generations. Therefore, it can be assumed that Camus will continue to gain his new vitality in the Chinese context.

To read literature, especially to read pure literature is to seek a retreat from the madding crowd. However, the Sars Crisis in 2003 reminded the mass of *The Plague* and gave them a new opportunity to reread it and to re-understand the author. Shocked by what had insightfully been foretold in this fable, the Chinese readers identified their affinity with Camus. Over the past few years, searching engines, personal blogs and online forums have gained increasing popularity for the shared reading of the author and diversified our receptions of him. Although there is no exact estimation of his influence on our contemporary culture and our spiritual world, what can be affirmed is that he has participated in the construction of contemporary Chinese literature and continues to influence us. In one word, his journey in our country is still going on. His Chinese journey is still an on-going process

Profile of the Author

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