

Writing Forces: Revisiting the Aesthetic Concept of Shi 勢 in Chinese Calligraphy Criticism

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Abstract

Ideas regarding forces in things – and artists’ sensation and presentation of such forces – have been discussed by Western theorists Wassily Kandinsky, Rudolf Arnheim, and Gilles Deleuze. In Kandinsky’s *Point and Line to Plane*, for instance, “force” refers to both the physical strength that is exerted by the artist and the tension within points and lines. This paper concerns the aesthetic concept *shi* 勢 in Chinese calligraphy theory, a concept that could be regarded as a counterpart of “force” and was translated by some scholars as “force” or “force-form”. But what are the forces in Chinese calligraphy? Where are they? And how does a Chinese calligrapher capture them and render them visible? Revisiting the different aspects of calligraphic *shi* can yield some clues.

As it originally appeared in texts on military strategies and politics, *shi* meant disposition or circumstances, power or potential. In Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD), it was employed in calligraphy treatises and since then widely used in artistic criticism. This paper contends that it’s impracticable to find a single translation for the term *shi* in calligraphy theory as different types of *shi* flow through six conterminous phases in calligraphy practice. *Shi* is the tendency of the natural things, the proper state of mind that is favourable for calligraphic practice, the movement of the body and the brush, the tension within a stroke or character, and the dynamic configuration of a whole work. Informed by Western and Chinese art theory, this paper argues for a new understanding of *shi* and its use in calligraphy criticism.

Keywords: *shi* 勢, Chinese calligraphy, force

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Introduction

To what degree can we talk about a global theory of art? After we translate, for example, Chinese artistic terms into counterparts in English, can we then proceed with a global art discussion with full confidence? Questions like these often function as an alarm bell in doing comparative studies in the field of art theory. In some cases, it is just out of a search for artistic universality that we draw together some analogous or seemingly identical artistic terms in various cultures and then compare them. This paper, exactly out of such a desire, intends to explicate the term of “force” in art theory, or specifically, its use in twentieth century theoretical texts on art in the West and its Chinese “counterpart” – *shi* 勢 – in Chinese calligraphy criticism.

1. “Force” in Twentieth Century Art Theory

For English readers, the literary denotations of the word “force” are twofold: first, it refers to the concrete physical strength or power something has; second, it implies a powerful effect or quality that something possesses. Not a few Western art theories, in fact, also communicate these two meanings of the term “force”. But for the three Western authors that will be discussed in the following paragraphs, “force” obviously conveys more messages.

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), in 1926, published his *Point and Line to Plane* under the title of *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche*. In this book, “force” is a frequently mentioned concept linking the three elements of point, line and plane. A line, for Kandinsky (1979, p. 54, 124), is created when a force “hurls itself upon the point which is digging its way into the surface, tears it out and pushes it about the surface in one direction or another”; a circle is “the result of two forces which always act uniformly.” In this sense, “force” refers to the physical strength that is exerted by the artist and flows out of the brush. If the first type of “force” helps Kandinsky explain the linkage of the three elements, a second type of “force” seems to explicate why Kandinsky focused on these geometrical elements. This second type of “force”, in Kandinsky’s writing, is often an equivalent of “tension”. There is the force or tension within a point, in the first place, and then comes the tension in lines where it could be understood as the “force living within the element” and represents a part of the creative movement (Kandinsky, 1979, p. 57). And eventually, as Kandinsky (1979, p. 92) wrote, “A composition is nothing other than an exact law-abiding organization of the vital forces which, in the form of tensions, are shut up within the elements.”

Being both a perceptual psychologist and an art theorist, Rudolf Arnheim (1904-2007) moves one step forward from where Kandinsky arrives. In the first chapter of his magnum opus *Art and Visual Perception*, Arnheim distinguished three types of “forces”: physical forces, physiological forces, and psychological forces. The physical force can be understood as the actual pulling or pushing that can move a paper or other objects; they are real and exist in the physical world. But what and where are the

psychological forces? For Arnheim (1974, p. 16), psychological forces or perceptual forces, are not merely figures of speech, but real existence. Such forces, at one end, exist in any percept (including visual objects), and at the other, in the brain. The former is also called “psychological forces”, the latter “physiological forces”.

The third book is Gilles Deleuze’s (1925-1995) *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, first published in French in 1981. Deleuze’s interest in writing this book primarily lies in high modernism, its gesture of self-validating through a way of both creating the “new” and dismissing the “old”. And one of the “olds” is the tradition of representation (figuration) in pre-modern painting, which Deleuze held that modern painting should go beyond. For Deleuze (2003, p. 31), sensation is more profound or much closer to reality than representation; it has two faces – one “turned toward the subject” and the other “turned toward the object”, or rather, “it is both things indissolubly”. But this sensation is conditioned by force.

In a chapter titled “painting forces”, Deleuze (2003, p. 48) wrote that “for a sensation to exist, a force must be exerted on a body.” This “body” should not be identified as the human body by reflex, though it is the human body in Bacon’s painting that plays the role of the Figure and harbours the force and hence the sensation; it could also be the body of Cezanne’s apples and landscapes and Van Gogh’s sunflower seeds. In a word, the forces that closely related to sensation lie in all kinds of things, and “sensation is force made visible, audible and/or palpable.” (Slack, 2005, p. 135). And for painting, as Deleuze (2003, p. 48) succinctly put, the task of which is to “render visible forces that are not themselves visible.” But what exactly are these invisible forces? Deleuze (2003, p. 48-9) does enumerate some “elementary forces” such as “pressure, inertia, weight, attraction, gravitation, germination,” and he discerns these forces that rendered visible in the paintings of Millet, Cezanne, and Van Gogh. Although Deleuze’s main subject in this book is Francis Bacon’s visual painting, he has in mind a broad conception of art when he conjures the term – “force”. For him, force in art does not only refer to the invisible forces in visual art, the nonsonorous forces in music, but to all kinds of insensible forces that wait to be captured by artists and sensed by all.

2. *Shi* 勢 in Chinese Calligraphy Theory

In pre-Qin China (to 206 BC), the term *shi* does not carry the aesthetic meaning which this section will decipher, or rather there is no such a thing as self-conscious art in early China; the term *shi* is mainly found in texts on politics and military strategies. Used in political texts, it refers to a hierarchical “position”, which designates “the configuration of power relations in politics.” (Jullien, 1995, p. 40). With the support of this position, a man can exert his influence or authority to achieve his ends. In the Confucius classic *Shang shu* 尚書, also known as *Book of Documents* in English academia, Jun Chen – a man of high position in the government – was warned by the king: “Do not make use of your power to exercise oppression; do not make use of the

laws to practise extortion.” (Legge, 1879, p. 233). An early example as it is, the term *shi* was employed in this text and translated as “power”.

Shi is better known as a strategic concept in Chinese military tactics. In *Sunzi binfu* 孫子兵法 (universally known as *The Art of War*), the most famous and influential Chinese military treatise, *shi* is a key concept and also the title of a chapter. In many translations, such as Lionel Giles’s 1910 version, the Chinese term *shi* is rendered into a kind “energy”. In a passage from the chapter “Energy”, Giles (2005, p. 21) translated:

The clever combatant looks to the effect of combined energy, and does not require too much from individuals. Hence his ability to pick out the right men and utilize combined energy. When he utilizes combined energy, his fighting men become as it were like unto rolling logs or stones.

It is of vital importance for ancient Chinese strategist to capture and utilize energy on a battlefield. When a military commander observes and then harnesses the energy, his soldiers most probably find themselves in a favourable unhindered situation that leads to victory. “Energy”, however, is a too abstract or abstruse term, and it’s hard to know where exactly this energy comes from. For the French sinologist Francois Jullien (1995, p. 27-9), *shi* is better translated as “potential born of disposition”, and the disposition “includes the particular shape of the object (round or square) as well as the situation at hand.” It seems that Jullien’s rendering explicitly reveals the content of the “energy” in warfare, which can be summarized that energy is the potentials generated from the disposition. More specifically, the *shi* or the energy in *The Art of War* refers, on one hand, to the disposition of the natural circumstances such as the configuration of the lay of the land, and on the other, to the disposition or the state of mental being within the army. And a general in warfare should make the most of the terrain and try his best to boost his soldiers’ morale. In this way, it can be said that the *shi* (energy or potential) from the exterior and the *shi* from the interior have been captured.

In Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD), the term *shi* was employed in calligraphy treatises and since then widely used in artistic criticism. Many titles of calligraphy treatises that produced between the period of Eastern Han and Western Jin Dynasty (265-317 AD) bore the term *shi*, such as *Caoshu shi* 草書勢 (*Shi* of Cursive script), *Jiu Shi* 九勢 (Nine Types of *Shi*), and *Si ti shushi* 四體書勢 (*Shi* of the Four Scripts of Calligraphy). After Jin Dynasty, the concept of *shi* enters into the theory of painting and literary criticism. The following discussion focuses exclusively on the calligraphic *shi*.

What is *shi* in Chinese calligraphy? In the above discussion, we have come across several translations or meanings of this term: as a position of strength that confers authority, as energy, or potentials born of disposition. In the field of art criticism, *shi*

also has multiple meanings, and it is impossible to designate a single unified English translation for this term. For contemporary Chinese aesthetician Gao Jianping (2012, p. 189), there exists at least two kinds of *shi* in Chinese visual art: “one is the *shi* of the objective world, or the movement or tendency within all animate and inanimate beings, which can be presented in painting; the other is the *shi* of calligraphy.” Unlike Chinese painting, Gao (2012, p. 176-99) holds that Chinese calligraphy is irrelevant to the forms of natural objects, and thus *shi* in this art is more related to the calligrapher who can capture “a certain spirit ‘behind’ the appearance of the world” and then display this spirit through a calligraphic stroke, an ideogram, and a whole work. Explicit and helpful as Gao’s approach is, such a dichotomy by no means uncovers the entire contents of the subjective *shi* and by no means covers the multiple meanings of *shi* in calligraphic practice.

What dimensions does calligraphic *shi* take on? And how should we grasp this multifaceted term *shi* in Chinese calligraphy? It is desirable that we enumerate the meanings one by one, but the crux is to link the different aspects of calligraphic *shi* in a logical organic way. Imagine a real calligraphic practice that involves a calligrapher and the viewers – preparation of the calligrapher (physically and mentally), calligrapher’s bodily movement, the execution of a stroke and the completion of the whole work, the calligraphic work in the eyes of the viewers as well as the calligrapher; this paper contends that *shi* flows through or resides in each of these phases.

2.1 *shi* of nature

Calligraphic practice does not start with a calligrapher’s picking up a model-book, grabbing a brush and then starting to write, if one considers the environment calligraphers dwell in. By environment this section means the natural conditions such as the land, cloud, mountain or water, the environment of the natural world, or *ziran* 自然 in Chinese conception. To understand the relationship between Chinese calligraphy and the natural world, it is tempting to call to mind the fact that Chinese calligraphy is an abstract art that based on the writing of Chinese characters, and some of Chinese characters are a kind of pictogram (imitation of the form of physical objects). But, this pictographic property of Chinese characters, as Gao Jianping (2012, p. 184) pointed out, should not be overvalued in Chinese calligraphy: for one, it is “only one among many ways to create characters,” and for the other, “the purpose of character writing was to communicate meaning rather than present forms.” Roughly speaking, a discussion of calligraphy-nature relations ought to be isolated or independent from the pictographic feature of Chinese characters. What really matters is the role of the nature in calligraphic practice – be it copy, creation or appreciation – and the attitude of calligraphers towards the natural world. An early laconic summary of the relationship between calligraphy and nature comes from *Jiu Shi* 九勢 (Nine Types of *Shi*), reputedly composed by the Eastern Han scholar and calligrapher Cai

Yong (132-192 AD). In this text, Cai Yong, probably for the first time, relates the art of calligraphy to the *shi* of nature:

Calligraphy comes from nature. As soon as nature established itself, *yin* and *yang* were given birth; as soon as *yin* and *yang* were born, *xingshi* [*xing* means form or shape; *shi* means momentum or tendency] appeared. (Gao, 2012, p. 182)

In the natural world, *yin* and *yang* can be understood as two contrary but also complementary forces, the binary principle in the great cosmic Process; they interact with each other to form a dynamic system, and everything has both *yin* and *yang* aspects. And Chinese calligraphy, for Cai Yong, captures these natural forces of *yin* and *yang* if a calligrapher delivers the dynamic *shi* by means of the relatively stable *xing* or form. The *shi* of calligraphy is thus connected to the *shi* of nature, or *ziran-zhi-shi* 自然之勢 in Chinese; a later section will discuss how the two are related.

Although Sun Zi, the author of *The Art of War*, did not employ the exact concept of *ziran-zhi-shi* (the *shi* of nature), he actually suggested not a few natural objects that contain *shi* (dispositions and tendencies). In the Han Dynasty philosophical classic *Huainanzi* (*The Masters of Huainan*), the term *ziran-zhi-shi* (the *shi* of nature) was mentioned several times, which is translated by Evan Morgan (1934, p. 9) as “natural conditions” or “natural laws”. Employed in a few classical commentaries in Chinese paintings, such as Zong Bing’s *Hua Shanshui Xu* (*A Preface on Landscape Painting*), the term *ziran-zhi-shi* could also be rendered as the natural tendency inherent in nature. The *shi* of a mountain, for example, is the tendency or the propensity of a mountain; different mountains would exhibit different *shi* or tendencies. For Chinese calligraphers, they are residing in and experiencing this *shi* of nature, these natural tendencies.

2.2 *shi* as a proper state of mind

A calligrapher may pick up his brush in various situations. A calligrapher may write on a whim, out of a sudden desire; he may write after being inspired by something in the natural world; he may write at the request of a friend or a nodding acquaintance. And it can be imagined, in various situations, calligraphers may have quite different states of mind before the writing. When a calligrapher gets into a state of mind that was proper for writing, he acquires *shi*, otherwise he loses *shi* (Gao, 1996, p. 102-3). In his influential *Shupu* 書譜 (Treatise on Calligraphy), Sun Guoting – the seventh century art critic and calligrapher – summarized five favourable or harmonious conditions and five unfavourable conditions before writing:

Because one writes at a given time, circumstances provide either discord or harmony. When there is harmony, the writing flows forth charmingly; when there is discord, it fades and scatters. Being happy in spirit and free from other

duties is the first harmony...But a restless mind and sluggish body constitute the first discord. An opposed will and constricted energy constitute the second discord... (Chang, 1995, p. 28)

In the above Chang Chung-Ho's translation, the second discord – *yi wei shi qu* 意違勢屈 – is rendered as “an opposed will and constricted energy”, which is unfavourable for subsequent calligraphic practice. Generally referring to the tendency of things and situations, *shi* here is used as an artistic term that describes a positive feeling or energetic mental state on the part of calligraphers. When it comes to calligraphic writing, this kind of mental *shi* or proper state of mind is likely to conduce to the coordinated movement of the body, the wrist and the hand; and hence the energy flows out of the writing brush.

2.3 *shi* of the body and *shi* of the brush/stroke

Now, a calligrapher picks up his brush, dips it in the ink, moves his arm, his wrist and hand, and starts to write, which leaves a trace of stroke on a piece of paper. Within this process flow two types of *shi*: the *shi* of the body and the *shi* of *bi*. As the Chinese term *bi* 筆 bears two meanings of brush and stroke, the *shi* of *bi* thus refers to both *shi* of the brush and *shi* of the brushstroke. The *shi* of the brush can be translated as the movement of the brush, while the *shi* of the stroke is an effect, a kind of tension within the stroke, which is analogous to the tensions in the idea of “force” as explained by Kandinsky and Arnheim.

Behind the statement that all brushstrokes flow from brush hide calligraphers' bodily gesture. There is no doubt that a calligrapher leaves on paper a trace of brushstroke only through the movement of finger, wrist, hand, arm, and even the whole body. For this reason, this section juxtaposes the *shi* of the body and the *shi* of the brush and stroke.

This juxtaposition can be better understood through a further discussion of “the *shi* of the brush” 筆勢, a term that occupies an important place in classical calligraphy theory. The above mentioned *Jiu Shi* (Nine Types of *Shi*), for example, concerns actually with nine techniques for using the brush tip or calligraphic writing. With regard to the third technique of “hiding tip”, Cai Yong explicated that it is realised by “making an initial movement in the direction opposite that in which the brush must travel, both at the beginning and at the completion of the ideogram, thus concealing the mark made by the brush tip at the start of the stroke.” (Jullien, 1995, p. 108). Descriptions like this act as guides to both the quality of brushstrokes (*shi* of brushstroke) and the movement of body (*shi* of body). To some degree, it can be said that the gesture of the body, the movement of the brush and the form of a brushstroke are simultaneous equivalent.

2.4 capturing *shi*

In the first place, there is *shi* of nature. Then there is *shi* of the body and of the brush and brushstroke. And now the question is how the *shi* (tendency) in nature and the *shi* (tension) in brushstrokes are related? The answer lies in another important aesthetic concept in Chinese visual art – *qu shi* 取勢.

The aesthetic term *qushi* implies Chinese artists' attitude towards nature, in which *qu* means "to pick" or "to choose" and *shi* denotes the tendency of natural objects. A combined term that used in Chinese painting and calligraphy theory, *qushi* suggests that nature occupies an important position in the practice of Chinese visual arts. Yet, *qushi* in calligraphic practice is subtly different from that in pictorial practice. It's not hard for us to understand that a Chinese painter, in representing natural objects, needs to *qushi*, or capture the tendency within the natural objects. While as an abstract linear art, calligraphy is unlikely to imitate or duplicate natural things. As Gao Jianping (1996, p. 97) wrote,

In the minds of these calligraphers, the *shi* of the natural world could provide certain suggestions or stimulation. They needed this *shi* but would not take it directly to be the *shi* of their work; it first had to be transformed before it was acceptable for calligraphy.

It's hard to comprehend how this transformation from the *shi* of the natural things to the *shi* of calligraphic ideogram is achieved unless one has direct aesthetic experience of Chinese calligraphy. Fortunately, in Chinese calligraphy theory, there are abundant treatises or commentaries that contain natural imageries. And through a comparison of the natural imageries with corresponding calligraphy strokes, viewers are likely to perceive how a calligrapher captures *shi* in the natural world. In *Bizhen Tu* 筆陣圖 (Diagram of the Battle Formation of the Brush), a famous text that attributed to Wei Furen, seven basic calligraphic strokes are compared to several kinds of *shi* or tendency inherent in natural objects. For instance, a dot should be written like a stone falling from high peak, and the perpendicular strokes like a withered vine that are ten thousand years old (Barnhart, 1964, p. 13-25). Abundant natural imageries like this could be read as both descriptions of calligraphic strokes' *shi* or force and hints about how to capturing the *shi* in natural objects.

2.5 *shi* of individual characters

As discussed earlier, there is *shi* or tension within a single stroke. But normally, a Chinese character consists of more than one stroke, and it is anticipated that there is a kind of dynamic continuity flowing through all the strokes of a character. As far as an individual character concerned, the structural tendency towards a dynamic ideogram is the *shi* of individual characters.

To obtain the structural dynamism or the *shi* within an individual character, a calligrapher should pay attention to two aspects. The first aspect concerns with the writing of two neighboring strokes: the *shi* of each stroke and its following stroke should be linked in a natural dynamic way. This point is expressly stated in *Jiu Shi* (Nine Types of *Shi*): “Whenever one puts brush to paper and compose characters, each stroke should breed the following one, and the following stroke should succeed its previous one.” (Huang, 1997, p. 6). The second aspect to be considered is that a calligrapher should create an effect of structural force within all the strokes of a character. As the first rule in his *On Ten Methods of Using the Brush*, Zhang Huaiguan wrote that “*shi* must be achieved, both for dots and for strokes, through the creation of tension between top and bottom, lowering-lifting, separating-gathering together.” (Jullien, 1995, p. 78). The tension within a calligraphic ideogram is analogous to the tension of lines in the sense of Kandinsky, but the former is apparently more complicated than the latter.

2.6 *shi* flowing through the overall composition

And now, imagine a calligrapher completes his writing, which contains several columns of characters. Within a column, there is *shi*, a kind of continuity or even momentum flowing from a brush that runs from the top of the column to the bottom. But the force of this brush does not stop there at the end of that column; it carries on to the next column, to the last character, the last stroke of the whole work. And *shi* of the whole work, in Susan Bush translation, refers to the “dynamic configuration of all the characters and strokes in a calligraphic work.”

Shi of the overall composition is of crucial importance for a work of calligraphy, as the first impression of the work is mainly based on it. In another word, the experience of *shi* that flows through the overall composition is the start of appreciating Chinese calligraphy. After this phase, viewers then focus on the *shi* or dynamic tension within an individual character, the *shi* of a stroke or line.

Conclusion

According to the above discussion, it can be said that the term *shi* in calligraphy criticism has many dimensions, and there is no single translation of this term. *Shi* is the tendency of the natural things, the proper state of mind that is favourable for calligraphic practice, the movement of the body and the brush, the tension within a stroke or character, and the dynamic configuration of a whole work. It refers to an effect, a momentum, a kind of energy, and also to the actions that produce such effects. Gilles Deleuze (2003) said that, “in art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces.” The calligraphic *shi*, to some extent, is a counterpart of the term “force” in Western art theory, and it can be said that in Chinese calligraphy, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing *shi*.

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Chinese calligraphy is a type of pleasing writing, as well as a kind of sport, embodying the artistic expression of human language in a tangible form. This type of expression has been widely practiced in China and has been generally held in high esteem across East Asia. Calligraphy is considered as one of the four best friends of ancient Chinese literati, along with playing stringed musical instruments, the board game "Go", and painting. There are some general standardizations of the various styles of