

Final Research Paper

The Concept of *Shih*: From Sun-tzu to Chinese Aesthetics

Introduction

The Chinese concept of *shih* is an elegant and complex thinking unique to the Chinese culture and tradition. Allowing the propensity inherent in the every kind of reality to operate on its own accord and to maximum effect is the operative concept this essay seek to explore across different domains of reality.

The first part of the essay investigates the concept of *shih* as it is applied in military texts of Sun-tzu and in politics and political rhetoric and communication. The second part of the essay reflect on the application of the concept of *shih* as it is applied in Chinese aesthetic— base on François Jullien’s comprehensive study of the concept in the aesthetics of calligraphy, painting and literary theory, and also study the articulation and rendering of the concept in the composition of some prominent works of calligraphy, painting, and poem.

PART I: The Concept of *Shih* as applied in military text of Sun Tzu and in Politics

The Concept of *Shih* in Sun-tzu

*Shih* is the defining idea in the *Sun Tzu: The Art of Warfare*. In the assertion, “The victorious army first realizes the conditions for victory, and then seeks to engage in battle (Sawyer p. 165).” Sun Tzu indicate that the success or failure of a battle, *before* it is engaged, lies not in the enemies hands but in one’s own—as Sun Tzu said, “being unconquerable lie with yourself; being conquerable lies with the enemy (p.165).” This

assertion is at the heart of the Chinese strategic thinking—armed engagement should be minimize and victory can be secured at the earlier stage in the determination of events when disposition is dependent on our *own* initiative and the action we take to ensure that victory is predetermined. In warfare, when *shih* is translated to "strategic advantage" *shih* refers to all of the factors on both sides of the conflict, including numbers, terrain, logistics, morale, weaponry, as they converge on the battlefield to give one side the advantage over the other (Young p. 7-11). According to Sun-tzu, as configuration develops and takes shape, a victorious general recognize and anticipate the potential (*shih*) implied by that situation and secure victory from the potential born of disposition. As *shih* is the determining factor in warfare, it implied that human virtue—courage and cowardice—are not intrinsic, but are the product of external condition, a matter of *shih* (Jullien PT p. 30). Therefore, to take advantage of *Shih* is to rely solely on the internal operatives and effect in every given situations—a naturalistic management of reality and situation's potential energy from its natural configuration to achieve the maximum desired effect.

### The Concept of *Shih* in Politics

The concept of *shih* is central to the mechanism of power in politics and is centered on the notion of position. *Shih* is used to designate the potential that is embedded in the configuration of political position, which produces the power relations or gradient of obedience between individuals (Jullien TE p. 27). Parallel to Sun-tzu's concept of *shih* in warfare, effecting political change and exerting political power are a matter of the situation's inherent potential, and so are product of the situation rather than

qualities our own—it depends not on absolute forced, but rather, on exploiting the potential of power inherent in the positional configuration of power relation.

In a hierarchical organization of individual, the political *shih*'s definitional form is in the arrangement of political hierarchy with its internal working produce the gradient of power relation that individuals are subjected to. The propensity to be obeyed is power, and power inherent in position in a natural product of hierarchical political structure. As such, position can automatically explain the totally external nature of the determining factor in any situation (Jullien PT p. 41). The power of a position functions both autonomously and automatically independent from the qualities of the person using it (Jullien PT p. 50). The key is to make them work spontaneously upon the configuration is such a way that the external power may shed its physical pressure (Jullien PT p. 56). Therefore, positional *Shih* is the determining factor in politics.

The concept of *Shih* is also applied in the analysis political communication. The strategic generation of *shih* in political rhetoric is studied by Isaacson and Chung; they developed a Ch'i-*Shih* interaction model to analyze political rhetoric. The Chi-Shih model parallel closely with Jullien's analysis of *shih* in politics and in warfare—a potential energy in the configuration—but is applied entirely different reality—in the message and position in communication. Ch'i is defined as the maneuverable energy flow or perceived vitality in a person or message, which interacts with *shih*, strategic configuration of a potential and power of a circumstance (Issacson and Chung p. 5). Ch'i may create or enhance *shih*, and vice versa. In communication, one can boost the “message *shih*” by identifying with a value system or a favorable position to enhance the ch'i of the communicator or the message. Isaacson and Chung use their fourfold model of

*shih* to analyzed political rhetoric strategies employed by George W. Bush and Albert A. Gore in the 2000 presidential election stalemate. They find that in communication, rhetoric can be used to manipulating external favorable *shih* to boost Ch'i, rhetorics can be used to taking advantage of one's own favorable situation or *shih* to enhance Ch'i, rhetorics can be used to going against the unfavorable strong position or *shih* to spark Ch'i, or to creating favorable *shih* to boost Ch'i.

Isaacson and Chung's application of the concept of *shih* to analyze political rhetoric parallels the concept of shih in Sun-tzu's warfare and Jullien's analysis of shih in politics—they demonstrate that applying the concept of *shih*'s to understand, to perceive, and to manage reality of a situation is both instrumental and decisive in achieving the desired effect.

## PART II: Concept of *Shih* as applied in Chinese Aesthetics

### Concept of *Shih* in Chinese Aesthetics

The concept of *Shih* also served as the basis for Chinese aesthetic theory. The idea of an energy both fundamental and universal and based on a binary principle, yin and yang, with seamless interaction between the terms, which according to Julien, give rise to the ultimate meaning of *Shih* used as an aesthetic term—the power to promote the continuity of dynamism, rendering it perceptible through that energy and the semiotic of arts (Jullien PT p. 131-132). In another words, *Shih* in the Chinese aesthetic is the form to the disposition of reality that actualizes the universal dynamism embedded in the potentiality of configuration (ibid p. 260, p. 75-76). As a result, Chinese art is conceived as a process of actualization with the goal to produce a configuration of the dynamism

inherent in reality (ibid p. 75). The three jewels of Chinese aesthetics—calligraphy, painting, and poem—all strive to achieve this goal—full expression of the “unfathomable vitality of the invisible through actualization of a perceptible configuration (ibid p. 152).”

### Concept of *Shih* in the Chinese art of Calligraphy

The concept of *Shih* is an important basis for the aesthetic theory of Calligraphy because calligraphy rest on the configuration of ideograms—if calligraphic art is conceived as a process of actualization with the goal to produce a configuration of the dynamism inherent in reality, then Chinese aesthetic calligraphy is prime example of this process.

Calligraphic *shih* is the force that runs through the form of the written character and animates it aesthetically—it gives dynamism and depth to the static form and exceed its concrete limitation by revealing the actualized static form (Jullien PT p. 76). In creating calligraphic *shih*, the cursive calligraphy is the key—it’s single continuous uninterrupted stroke with controlled but impulse-deployed surplus movement—from the beginning to the end in one breath—gives rise to the propensity of the impulse of energy that impart dynamism. As such, one sees not simply the static form of character, but a continuing transforming process of the stroke—one sees the *force of form*. Two calligraphy example (please see Appendix A) demonstrates how the cursive calligraphy’s continuous surplus movement achieve the flow and continuity of the dynamism—compare to the stable, discrete, discontinuous structure of regular writing.

*Shih* of calligraphy is the backbone of an ideogram—when the *Shih* is harmonious, the body will be balanced. Structural consistency and harmony of the

elements is achieved because each character has one and the same calligraphic *shih*. A prime example of a harmonious *shih* achieving balance of heterogeneous body is a famous calligraphy work of Su Shi (蘇軾) or Su Dongpo (蘇東坡) of the Song dynasty (please see Appendix B). Su Dongpo's calligraphy excelled in the achieving *Shih*. The calligraphy demonstrates Su's mastery of the achieving *Shih*—and the actualization reality of dynamism in static form and maintaining structural consistency of the form with dynamism. Therefore, *Shih* is beyond a rhetorical ornamentation in calligraphy, it is actual process of producing a configuration of the dynamism inherent in reality.

#### Concept of *Shih* in the Chinese art of Painting

The concept of *Shih* is fundamental to how the Chinese vision the world; *Shih* is the naturalistic picture of action in the world (lecture). As such, the concept of *Shih* is the basis of aesthetic theory in painting because the reality of things only exist, and thus only manifest itself in its totality through the force of propensity that links its various elements as a whole (Julien PT p. 99)

*Shih* is the tension generated in the contest between surplus and deficiency that becomes the "force of the circumstances" (Young p. 5). The creation of tension is central to achieving *shih* in the Chinese aesthetics of landscape painting. The central element in the Chinese landscape painting—the mountain, by virtue of its configuration, offer the greatest possibility for tension creation (Julien PT p. 80). For example, in painting a mountain, a trail of cloud of mist confer the effect of measureless and blurring the lines impart greater distance—both impart *shih* on the mountain. The primacy of *shih* is given to contour lines or *lifeline* in a landscape, which creates the dynamic configuration that

create the desired effect of *shih*. The *lifeline* also provide the general structure of the painting, it is called lifeline as it constitutes the framework indispensable for the form, it constituted both the skeleton of the landscape and the overall movement of the landscape (ibid p.98).

Sheng Maoye's (1610-1640) *Autumn Landscape*, a permanent collection at the Johnson museum, is a prime example of the painter's masterful use of principles of *shih* to achieve dynamism in Chinese landscape painting (Appendix C). In this ink and slightly colored painting, Sheng Maoye achieved *Shih* of the landscape is created through tension, contrast, and atmosphere. In the distance, the tension created by the correlation between the lines and the washes, the visible and the invisible, fullness and emptiness, endows the landscape with a power to suggest more than the merely visible and opens it up to the life of the spirits (Julien PT p. 98, p. 136-7, p.174). Sheng's treatment of atmosphere—the enveloping mist gently obscures the distant mountains, and the muted autumnal colors—confer *Shih* on the mountain. In particular, Sheng's rendering of the mountains, the tension in the contours line emanates the vital energy of the stones, the 'lifeline' of the landscapes. Most importantly, Sheng's landscape set up contrast the opposite of emptiness and fullness to achieved great *Shih*. As a result, the overall movement of the painting constituted by the *Shih* of the landscape corresponds to the internal coherence of reality and produce its idiosyncratic logic of arrangement individual element that are connected in unity by *Shih*—the source of dynamism for perceiving the overall movement of the landscape. Sheng's *Autumn landscape* fully demonstrates the principle of *Shih* that is central to aesthetic configuration of Chinese painting.

### Concept of *Shih* in the Chinese art of Poems

In the domain of literary composition, the poetic *shih* is in the use of disposition to impart the maximum energy and dynamism to the flow of the text (Julien PT p. 129). Su Dongpo's notable poems the First and Second Chibifu (赤壁賦 *The Red Cliffs*), which combined spontaneity, objectivity and vivid descriptions of natural phenomena, is a good example of use of poetic/literary *Shih*. Zheng (1999)'s literary analysis of the Red Cliff is be used to demonstrate how literary composition techniques of contrast and correlation produce the type of potentiality that stem as a literary effect from the particular form of the composition. In particular, several excerpts from *The Red Cliffs* demonstrate this. The tension created by the interaction that is taking place between landscape and individual is a method of creating *Shih* that is fully developed by Su in the Red Cliff. In this excerpt (please see Appendix D Line A and B), in response to the landscape, the emotions of rush and blitheness contrast the individual's state of separation and loneliness in the world, where as the four sounds of emotion 「怨、慕、泣、訴」 is a sharp contrast to the vast and liberating depiction of the landscape—as a result, *shih* is fully developed (Zheng 1999). Configuration of long and short rhythms, as well as of verticality of the mountain, achieve dynamism is demonstrated in Line C. The use of contrast and correlation, and configuration of a couplet, renews vitality fueled by the interaction of polar opposites (Julien PT p. 140). Line D is an example of contrast and correlation create *Shih* of landscape is the couplet—the wind and water waves are contrast with their respective motions. Poetic *shih* is therefore the dispositional propensity born of that emotion,



articulate meaning with dynamism, it is this *shih* that succeed at creating the literary effect in this inspiring work.

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破竈燒滷菜  
知是寒食但見鳥  
銜帛  
天門深



Appendix A

自我來黃州已過三  
食年、欲惜春  
容惜今年又若兩  
蕭瑟此用海棠花  
子遊支雪閣中偷  
去夜半真有力何殊

舉匏樽以相屬寄蜂  
於天地渺浮海之一粟  
吾生之須臾羨長江之  
窮挾飛仙以遨游抱  
明月而長終知不可乎驟  
月託遺響於悲風蘇子  
容亦知夫水與月乎逝者

Appendix D:

Excerpts from 《赤壁賦》

Lines A:

「浩浩乎如馮虛御風，而不知其所止；飄飄乎如遺世獨立，羽化而登仙」

Line B:

「客有吹洞簫者，倚歌而和之，其聲嗚嗚然，如怨如慕，如泣如訴，餘音嫋嫋，不絕如縷。舞幽壑之潛蛟，泣孤舟之嫠婦」

Line C:

「出于東山之上，徘徊于斗、牛之間」

Line D:

「清風徐來，水波不興」