

Introduction

The focus of this dissertation is on the dynamic concept of *shi* and on its complex influences on traditional Chinese architecture. This dissertation seeks to establish a new perspective in understanding the craft of architecture within the traditional Chinese cultural context.

In the recently compiled *Chinese Encyclopedia of Philosophical Terms*, the Chinese ideogram *shi* (勢) is categorized in two broad areas of knowledge. The first category considers *shi* to be a philosophical concept and construes it as “power” or “authority” that is derived from a dictatorial position. This *shi* is discussed in the writings of Shen Dao (慎到 circa 395–315 BC) and Han Fei (韓非 circa 280–233 BC), who were key figures in the Legalist school of thought during the Warring States Period (475–221 BC). These philosophers stressed that the *shi* born out of political hierarchical systems allow less capable kings to prevail over individuals possessing superior talents. The second category considers *shi* to be an aesthetic concept and describes it as an “elusive and marvelous force” that animates an artifact.¹ The Ming scholar Wang Fuzhi specifically articulates the notion of *shi* as a force that is expressed through the

In this dissertation, Chinese names are given in the traditional format as the surname first, then the given name. The titles of the Chinese books and the Chinese terms are transliterated in standard pinyin. For the names of the Chinese authors that have their books published in English, their names appearing on their book are used. When indicated, translations from Chinese text into English are by the author. In footnoting, when a website URL is given followed by Chinese text, the Chinese text is extracted from that website.

¹Feng Qi, *Zhe xue da ci dian*, (Shanghai, 2001), p. 1355.

composition of seemingly random images in poetry in order to generate tension that provokes aesthetic motions and sensations.²

However, as explained in this dissertation, *shi* is an even broader interdisciplinary concept, one that has been debated by many philosophical schools of thought in the Warring States Period. Although the philosophical debates among these various schools diverge in their explanations about the efficacies of *shi*, they all implicitly portray *shi* as a *potential or force instantaneously born from a disposition*. As noted by the French sinologist Francois Jullien, the epistemological derivative of the ideogram *shi* further supports such an understanding:

The term *shi* is the same as the word *yi* (艺) which is believed to represent a hand holding something, a symbol of power to which the diacritic radical for force or *li* (力) was later added. Xu Shen thinks that what is held in the hand is a clod of earth, which could symbolize something put in position or a “positioning.”³

Nowadays, this essential connotation of *shi* is generally misconstrued and given a range of static meanings, such as “power (势力),” “authority (权势),” “situation (形势),” or “tendency (趋势).” However, in his book *The Propensity of Things*, Jullien re-grasps the meaning of *shi* as a potential or force spontaneously

² Alison Harley Black, *Man and Nature in the Philosophical Thought of Wang Fu-Chih*, (Seattle, 1989), p. 277.

³ Francois Jullien, *The Propensity of Things*, (New York, 1999), p. 267.

born out of a disposition.⁴ He elucidates this understanding of *shi* and explores the efficacy of *shi* in the fields of traditional Chinese warfare, politics, literature, poetry, calligraphy, and painting. Jullien does not, however, address *shi* in the field of traditional Chinese architecture.⁵

Studying the traditional Chinese architectural element of the door through the lens of *shi* is the main endeavor of this dissertation, which proposes a new perspective in understanding the clever techniques deployed in architectural construction, the embodied cultural connotations, and the aesthetics achieved by the artful arrangements of architectural elements. Doors investigated in this dissertation not only include the physical elements of a door (i.e., the hinges, leafs, door hood- a canopy-like structure above the door opening), it also includes the spatial aspects relating to the door (i.e., the doorway space, the orientation and size, and the paths organized by doors). The selection of the architectural element of the door as the focus of investigation was inspired by the discovery during the initial investigation of this research of the significant role played by this building element within traditional Chinese architecture.⁶ A couple of books have been published in Chinese on the subject of Chinese doors, which reveal the door as an architectural element extremely rich with cultural and tectonic significance.

⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

⁶ Wu Yucheng, *Zhongguo de men wen hua*, (Tianjin, 1999). Also see Wang Zijin, *Men ji yu men shen chong bai*, (Shanghai, 1996), and Zhu Qingsheng, *Jiang jun men shen qi yuan yan jiu*, (Beijing, 1998), and Lou Qingxi, *Zhongguo jian zhu de men wen hua*, (Wuhan shi, 2001), discussing door culture in relation to door as an architectural element.

The many varieties of doors and the complexities of their construction and disposition faithfully reflect the efficacy of *shi*. For this detailed investigation of doors and of the efficacy of *shi* as reflected in doors, the various house doors in the Huizhou region are chosen as examples because the mountainous geography isolates Huizhou from many tragic upheavals and preserves a large quantity of characteristic Ming dynasty (1368–1644 AD) and Qing dynasty (1644–1911 AD) houses. The Yin Yu Tang (Y YT) house from the Huizhou region, built in the early 19th century, is used as the most important case study. The Y YT house is one of the most representative types of traditional dwellings in the Huizhou region. Furthermore, when the Y YT house was dismantled in Huizhou and reassembled in the Peabody Essex Museum in the 1990s, the process discloses many hidden details about the house and its door construction.

Investigating architectural doors using the theoretical framework of *shi* further reveals that this ancient Chinese concept is essentially amorphous and weak. *Shi* can be considered as a parallel form of Gianni Vattimo's "weak ontology." *Shi* in architecture is analogous to Ignasi de Sola-Morales "weak architecture," in the sense that *shi* shifts with the ever-changing situation and with the fleeting passage of time. Paradoxically, this elusive nature of *shi* bestows complexity, diversity, and richness to the forms and meanings of traditional Chinese house doors.

Rethinking the Concept of *Shi*

Different schools of philosophical thought about the concept *shi* from the Warring States Period provide the rudimentary foundations for later

investigations of house doors in the Huizhou region. These philosophical views are analyzed as (a) advantageous *shi* (*lishi*, 利勢), (b) authoritative and ritual *shi* (*lishi*, 力勢), and (c) self-so-doing *shi* (*ziranzhishi*, 自然之勢).⁷

The concept of advantageous *shi* born out of a beneficial disposition is studied by examining the theory of the Militarist Sun Zi (孙子 544–496 BC) in his *The Art of War*. He interprets *shi* as an undefeatable power generated from strategic and crafty battle dispositions, which results *li* (利); that is, advantageous or beneficial. Once artifices are shrewdly deployed to obtain favorable troop positions in the phases of warfare, these positions automatically generate advantageous or beneficial *shi*, which leads to swift victories with minimal destructive face-to-face confrontation. Like a general who sets up his troops in an *oblique* position to gain a swift victory, the craftsman in ancient Chinese culture deploys his materials and tools in an adept way to obtain the best advantage from construction circumstances, thus garnering the advantageous *shi*. The concept of advantageous *shi* corresponds to the ancient Greek concept of *metis* and the Roman concept of *sollertia*. In the art of making buildings, *metis* and *sollertia* represent a cunning wisdom (e.g., wisdom used to devise tools or develop construction techniques) that can quickly achieve practical efficiency.

⁷ The word self-so-doing *shi* (*ziranzhishi*) is a self-initiating, self-propelling and “doing-so-by-itself” tendency springing out from a disposition that has minimal human imposition. Such a meaning of the self-so-doing *shi* is used in the context of this dissertation. The word “self-so-doing” comes from David L. Hall, Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China, Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*, (Albany, 1995), p. 185.

The concept of authoritative and ritual *shi* is investigated by analyzing the writings of the Legalist school of philosophers and the Confucian philosophers of the Warring States Period who applied *shi* in the political and social domains. The Legalists philosophers Shen Dao and Han Fei compare *shi* with authority of a ruling disposition in a hierarchical political structure. Such a *shi* is termed as authoritative *shi* here which has the efficacy of enforcing order in society. The Confucian philosopher Xun Zi (荀子 310–238 BC) reframes authoritative *shi* as a ritual *shi* that is generated by the correct performance of Confucian rites. Both *shi* are simultaneously infused into the political and ritual dispositions. Comparable to these notions of *shi* as power generated from either political or ritualistic means, the Fengshui masters perceive *shi* as a dynamic cosmological *shi* embodied within the landscape and building environment. In another words, various landscape and building dispositions inherently cultivate *shi* as the result of cosmological influences.

The self-so-doing *shi* is studied by looking at the concept of self-so-doing discussed in the book *Zhuangzi*. Self-so-doing is the intrinsic “doing so by itself” nature of a disposition or an entity. Self-so-doing *shi* is the tendency to spontaneously follow the self-so-doing of a disposition and adapting to its ever-changing reality. In the book of *Zhuangzi*, the advantageous *shi* and the cunning crafts are devalued. Instead, following the self-so-doing *shi* lifts the clever techniques into the realm of art. For example, using compass to draw a perfect circle is clever; however, drawing a perfect circle naturally with the free hand becomes an art. *Zhuangzi* also demotes the authoritative and ritual *shi* because it

tends to rigidify the human body by imposing artificial rules on its mundane behaviors and its natural tendencies- the stiff ritual body is rejected in place of a self-so-doing body. Only a self-so-doing body allows the self-so-doing *shi* take over allowing one to genuinely appreciate the beauty of nature and of being natural.

These philosophical views of *shi* have exerted a profound influence on the construction and the disposition of Chinese house doors built between the 16th and 19th centuries in the Huizhou region.

The Cultural Background of the Huizhou Merchants and Craftsman

The Huizhou culture is examined here to establish the cultural context for a discussion about *shi* in architecture and its relationship with different house doors. After describing geographic and demographic developments in the Huizhou region up to the 19th century, the cultures of two groups of Huizhou people are explored: craftsmen and merchants. These two groups were the main forces shaping the character of Huizhou houses. Due to various demographic, geographic, and cultural factors, these two groups showed a great capacity for strategic adaptation. The Huizhou craftsmen fully exploited both the rich local natural resources and the influx of outside technologies, thereby creating and sustaining a unique, versatile craftsmanship culture. Similarly, the Huizhou merchants agilely adapted themselves to the changing social landscape, the new administrative policies, and the developing markets, and thus achieved great financial success from the 16th to the 19th century. Together, both groups used

their wisdom, dexterity, and strategies to contribute to the construction of various unique houses in the Huizhou region, including the YYY house.

The Advantageous *Shi* in the Construction of the Door

Under the auspices of the advantageous *shi*, the clever construction techniques that are utilized to achieve the function of the door as a moveable boundary are investigated. Three aspects of the craftiness associated with the door are studied. The first aspect is the door hinge, which is considered to be a crafty mechanism inherently attaining the advantageous *shi* utilizing a levered balance to allow a small force to maneuver a large mass. Facilitated by this clever device—the door hinge—a door is configured into a movable boundary. Because a door can be positioned as closed, open, or half open, these positions acquired different spatial perceptions and cultural meanings.

The second aspect of craftiness is the use of sacred amulets on the door or hood of the door to cunningly convey a set of metaphysical dispositions and powers beyond the door's physical functions. Thus, a physically closed door can be metaphysically open to bestow various blessings on the people living within the demarcated space. Conversely, a physically open door can metaphysically shut out the intrusion of evil spirits.

The third aspect of craftiness is the tectonic cleverness of door construction. Through the craftsman's intelligent use of the advantageous *shi*, various doors were built economically and skillfully to fit the requirement of

different circumstances. For example, to protect from fire, main entrance doors are cleverly embedded with specially kilned bricks to achieve fire resistance.

The three aspects of the craftiness of the door are exemplified in Huizhou house doors. The various types of hinges used, the charming door amulets, and the clever techniques used in door construction and installation are discussed in detail by looking at the YYT house doors and at other house doors from the Huizhou region.

The Ritual and Cosmological *Shi* in the Orientation and Size of the Door

According to the theory of ritual and cosmological *shi*, traditional Chinese house doors were built as ritualistic and cosmological entities by manipulating the size and orientation of the doors. How the orientation and size of a door is used to embody ritual *shi* can be analyzed by looking into the classical Confucian scriptures, such as the *Book of Etiquette* (*yili*, 仪礼) and the *Book of Records* (*lijì*, 礼记). In these Confucian scriptures, the center of the door bears the most significant ritual meaning and possesses the most powerful *shi*. Although the east side of a door is not as prominent in status, it takes precedence over the west side. Such Confucian orientation hierarchies originated from the primitive understandings of cosmological orientation during the ancient times.

The Confucian scriptures also reveal that the grander sizes of doors embody a more powerful ritual *shi* than do simpler doors. Over the centuries, the various Confucian government decrees regulated the sizes of doors based on

social hierarchies affecting house door design and construction. Officials were given the larger and grander doors, while lesser individuals were allowed smaller and simpler doors. In addition, within the same house, a door with a central orientation was taken to possess higher social status and was built more grandly than the doors on the east side and in a more imposing manner than doors on the west side. The orientation and size hierarchies are clearly constructed into the Huizhou houses built by newly prosperous merchants from the 16th to the 19th century. The YYT house doors provide an ideal model to understand these means of encoding the ritual *shi*.

The orientation and size of house doors, besides embodying ritual *shi*, bestow favorable cosmological *shi* if they are positioned in auspicious directions and sized to favorable dimensions. This follows the cosmological *shi*, as construed in Fengshui theories. Only house doors with a favorable orientation and appropriate size can contain beneficial cosmological *shi* with which to bless occupants. The details of the methods and theories used to determine favorable house door orientations and sizes are analyzed here by studying some of the traditional Fengshui treatises on dwellings. The YYT house provides an example for examining these theories and for better understanding the cosmological *shi* embodied in house doors.

The Self-so-doing *Shi* of the Door in Organizing Space and Movement

In the context of traditional Chinese architecture, the self-so-doing *shi* of the door allows it to be natural so as to follow the intrinsic tendency of a door in organizing space and directing movement. To analyze this self-so-doing *shi* of

the door, the ancient and pivotal role of the door as an organizer of space and movement is explored. Antique chamber dwellings and courtyard houses are analyzed to see how the position of the door functions to arrange space and guide circulation. Then some of the simple yet elegant private house garden doors are investigated to study how these garden doors were built to be natural. Their naturalness represented by the simplicity of their forms blends the garden doors into the garden scenes as well as amplifies the self-so-doing *shi* of them in organizing the garden scenes and guiding the movements of the body. Even within the limited space of some old Chinese houses (e.g., the YYT house), the route of circulation is created through an arrangement of doors to allow a free and natural wandering of the body across multiple levels.

The Essence of *Shi*

All the aspects of *shi* (i.e., advantageous *shi*, authoritative and ritual *shi*, and self-so-doing *shi*) are epistemologically built into various household doors. The complexity, diversity, and richness of doors as an architectural element reveal that the concept of *shi* in architecture does not allow for a static or permanent interpretation. Instead, the concept of *shi* requires each situation and every moment in time to be regarded as unique. A sequence of architectural reflections on *shi*, therefore, further reveals the essence of *shi*.

By nature, *shi* is amorphous and weak because it mutates in accordance with the transformation of design and construction circumstances and underscores the fluid experience of temporality. It supports an open system that progresses from minute detail to broad concept, rather than a process of closing

down from broad concept to minute detail. The amorphous and weak essence of *shi* in architecture gives it a constructive power that results in the making of building elements fitting in the traditional Chinese cultural context. Similarly, if this essence of *shi* is applied as a theoretical framework for the design and construction of modern Chinese architecture, it can serve to unravel the quandaries raised by today's environment of internationalism, and allow instead for the creative conception of buildings fitting both Chinese contemporary needs and historical traditions.