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

---

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

---

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.
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 (YYT) house from the Huizhou region, built in the early 19th century, is used as the most important case study. The YYT house is one of the most representative types of traditional dwellings in the Huizhou region. Furthermore, when the YYT 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, 利势), (b) authoritative and ritual shi (lishi, 力势), and (c) self-so-doing shi (ziranzhishi, 自然之势).  

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 YYT 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* (*liji*, 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.