

Dynamic Forces in Xu Beihong's "Ba Ren Ji Shui": Analyzing the Aesthetics of Shi in Republic of China Literati Painting

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Abstract

This study explores the artistic qualities of shi (internal energy) within Xu Beihong's depiction of the working class, guided by the principles of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Focusing on the painting *Ba Ren Ji Shui* (Sichuan Folks Drawing Water from the River), the analysis examines how shi—alongside elements of nature, qi (vital energy), and emotion—interacts within the structural and thematic composition of the artwork. Xu Beihong's application of shi not only reveals deep emotional resonance but also integrates qi into the broader Chinese aesthetic tradition, creating a harmonious and dynamic expression of life. His paintings embody the unity of nature and humanity, capturing both the physical and spiritual essence of the Chinese people's perseverance and resistance during times of hardship. By synthesizing traditional aesthetics with modern realism, Xu Beihong's work transcends mere visual representation, reflecting the inner vitality and indomitable spirit of the Chinese people in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Xu Beihong, Ba ren Ji shui, Shi, Chinese Aesthetics

1. Introduction

Chinese aesthetics, shi (internal energy), is a mysterious yet essential aesthetic component. There is a connection between qi (breath movements) and shi. As Di (2002, p. 48) claimed, qi is internal, while shi is external; qi appears at the beginning, and shi at the end; qi represents substance, and shi represents the phenomenon. The six essentials of Chinese art, as described by art historian Xie He during the Southern Dynasties period—qi yun sheng dong (engender movement through spirit resonance)—are likewise indisputable in works of art in the shi style. Hence, "shi uses the subject's heart to show the structural characteristics of the object of the work, influenced both by subjective emotions and the constraints of objective things" (Zhang, 1996). This article will analyze shi with a sense of movement through the paintings of Xu Beihong, particularly focusing on his depictions of laborers, which illustrate the inner essence of shi, as well as the fusion of qi, nature, and the mingling of emotion in *Ba Ren Ji Shui* (Sichuan Folks Drawing Water from the River).

The painting *Ba Ren Ji Shui* (Picture 1), which Ai (1980) states was later considered the most realistic large-scale Chinese painting of Xu Beihong's life, marked a turning point in his approach to realism. The refinement of *Ba Ren Ji Shui* reflects the creative essence of the Chinese painting tradition while also showcasing Xu Beihong's innovative methods. This painting enhances realism in contemporary art by depicting the daily life of ordinary people along the Jialing River, blending Western techniques with traditional Chinese cultural expression.

Painting experienced tremendous change during the Republic of China era, which was marked by social movements and warfare, including conflicts involving warlords, the Communist Party, and Japan's occupation. During this period, discussions about advancing the medium of painting represented an important turning point in art history. Paintings began to focus more on common people and the commercialization of art. According to Frank (2015), the evolution of modern ink painting, which communicates the continuation and sophisticated extension of literati ideas, was greatly influenced by the blending of sophisticated art with popular culture.



Figure 1. Xu Beihong, Ba Ren Ji Shui, 1938, ink and color on paper, 300 x 62 cm

2. Shi, Painting, and Nature

Shi is a central element in Chinese culture, encompassing war strategy, Taoism, literature, painting, and calligraphy (Rao, 2020). Shi is explained by Robinson (2017, p. 130) as the power, potentiality, or propensity that seems to drive the process. Nature is the source of shi in traditional Chinese aesthetics, and it serves as an inspiration for artists. Cai Yong, from the late Han period, highlighted the fact that shi originates from nature in his Nine Principles of Calligraphy statement: following the establishment of nature, yin and yang appear, and forms and shi follow.

Shi is the source and reference for painting philosophy. The Southern Dynasty artist and theorist Guo Xi, author of *Linquan Gaozhi* (Lofty Message of Forests and Streams), stated that landscape painting, along with the intention behind it, embodies this momentum. He suggested that by observing the landscape, one could see not only its physical form but also its potential and intrinsic qualities. Shi originates from nature and reflects the momentum of nature, including its laws and logical structure.

The Southern Dynasty artist Zong Bing emphasized this idea, stating, “To paint a vertical stroke three inches high can convey the height of a thousand rèn; to draw a horizontal line a few feet long can capture the vastness of a hundred miles. Therefore, when observing a painting, one should not worry about the lack of skill in capturing likeness but rather recognize that despite the small scale, it does not diminish its resemblance. This is the natural power of art.” In this context, rèn is an ancient Chinese unit of measurement roughly equivalent to 7 to 8 feet or 2 to 2.5 meters. This statement highlights how Chinese paintings can convey large distances and vast scales with relatively short strokes, demonstrating the artist’s ability to capture the spirit of the subject. In visible painting, the intrinsic speed of kilometers can be expressed in feet of space.

Xu (2010, p. 20) also emphasized the natural shi of artistic creation, stating that “the avenue of art is in pursuit of nature.” Shi shows the natural growth of everything in the universe, and the layout of the picture reflects the natural opening and closing of everything in the universe, presenting the internal logical relationships of the object. *Ba Ren Ji Shui* is an example of this, as it allows viewers to look at the people’s drawings and feel the inherent beauty rather than become jaded or weary of it.

Ba Ren Ji Shui is Xu Beihong’s depiction of the common life of the people of Chongqing. At that time, individuals were dependent on the river for their daily needs, and both men and women had to go to the river daily to fetch water in order to earn a living. They selected hefty wooden pails, filled them with water, and trekked home down the steep and rocky mountain path, often making multiple trips back and forth. The painting

shows seven people: a muscular man without a shirt fetching water with women dressed simply; a man in white sidestepping to avoid the others while bending over to pick up water; and three men who have finished climbing the steps, taking large, brisk strides. Xu (2010, p. 225) explained that learning to paint is best done by taking nature as a teacher: to draw a horse, one must study a horse, and to paint a chicken, one must study a chicken. According to Xu (1943), it is the responsibility of artists to observe natural life and uncover its beauty. He asserted that such observations make it impossible for artists to escape their duties; through them, they gain a greater ability to explore the beauty of nature, giving the nation's traditional naturalism hope for a bright future.

As Xu (1943) stated, his experiences during daily life in Chongqing during the war gave him a deep understanding of the hardships faced by the people. This experience also helped shape his approach to realism and contributed to the evolution of his style during that time, ultimately aiding in the development of Xu's realist path. Several shi images of working people were created through this realist expression, including *Sichuan Poor Women*, *Washerwoman*, and *Boatman*. The traditional Chinese aesthetics of natural shi have a strong connection to humanity, as demonstrated in Xu Beihong's work. Xu, who was deeply sympathetic to the socialist ideals of the time, saw it as his responsibility to help shape the structures of a new socialist art world, according to Clunas (1997).

Ba Ren Ji Shui exemplifies a high level of macro-scale shi, drawing out a hundred feet of stone steps and the Jialing River's towering cliffs. The image of the water carriers in Sichuan, captured in a moment of intense physical exertion, demonstrates an overflow of shi, which pervades the composition. Structuring momentum refers to the force and energy created by the structural form of the work and specific compositional techniques (Di, 2002, p. 142). According to Ai (1980), this long composition aligns with the needs of the content. It challenges the conventional horizontal hand scroll and develops the vertical scroll features of Chinese paintings. The painting's dimensions—300 centimeters high by 62 centimeters wide—give it a slender and tall appearance, creating the kind of scene described by the Song Dynasty literati Su Dongpo as “a hundred feet for the shape, a thousand feet for the potential.” This creates remarkable momentum and presents visual challenges. Aristotle (2005, p. 192) once stated that the primary characteristics of beauty are definiteness, symmetry, and order, all of which are particularly well-represented in mathematical sciences. Therefore, this kind of large-scale work is appropriate for narrating vast and important subject matter. The sheer potentiality conveyed in the volume of *Ba Ren Ji Shui* has a powerful impact on the audience's visual sense. Picasso's large-scale work *Guernica* (776 centimeters in length and 349 centimeters in height), which was created in response to fascist criticism, is similarly impactful. Large formats, such as those seen in Xu Beihong's works *Tian Heng and His 500 Followers*, *Awaiting My Lord*, and *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*, are effective for narrating historical events. The artwork *Ba Ren Ji Shui* is a grand reproduction of the geographical surroundings of Chongqing. It also depicts the people's will to endure the war and the artist's passion for family and nation, set against the historical backdrop of major wartime events.



Figure 2. Steps in front of Xu Beihong's residence

The theory of painting views nature as the source and reference for shi, in line with Xu Beihong's surroundings during this period and his realist style (Figure 2). Xu's investigation of methods for realistic watercolor and pen painting was influential (Barnhart, 1997, p. 320). The Chinese art world was greatly impacted by his fusion of Western and Chinese influences. Xu (2008) described how, at that time, he lived near the Jialing River in Panxi,

at the China Academy of Art, while also teaching at the Art Department of Central University in Shapingba. Panxi and Shapingba faced each other across the river, with Shimen (Stone Gate) in between, where the water flowed swiftly. There was a ferry crossing here, and each day he would travel from Panxi, cross the river to Shapingba, and then return, climbing hundreds of stone steps along the way.

While observing life by the riverside, Xu painted scenes of laborers. He explained that the focus on these figures, often depicted with their heads bowed and bodies worn, was inspired by the common struggles of laboring people at that time. Xu Beihong's daily exposure to the lower-class lifestyle in Chongqing allowed him to portray characters with realism and empathy. The volatility and potential of nature, mirrored in the meandering mountain streams, are captured in his paintings. The momentum of nature can be depicted in a limited space through visible painting. The arrangement of images in Xu Beihong's work captures the organic relationship between nature and society, reflecting the internal, rational connection between the working class and the structural elements of the painting.

3. Chinese Aesthetics Analysis

3.1 *The Shi with Qi (Breath-Movements)*

In traditional Chinese aesthetics, heaven and earth are naturally formed by qi, and shi originates from the image of nature. As Shen (2013, p. 61) notes, heaven and earth open and close, and the formation of all things into an image is directed by the natural movements of qi. Since qi is the origin of all things, when it gathers in a multitude, it can become shi. It is evident that the qi and shi of artistic creations complement one another. The underlying quality of a painting is spirit, which is formed by the combination of qi and shi. According to Ching Hao (c. 855-915), shi and qi are closely related. The combinations of dynamic configuration (shi) and vital energy (qi) produce the different appearances of mountains and streams (Bush & Shih, 2012, p. 164). Tang Dynasty painting theorist Zhang Yanyuan held that Wang Xianzhi's "one brush stroke" represented the shi of the qi connection, stating that today's body of shi, one brush stroke, and the qi connection are continuous. The world referred to the word at the beginning of the line as one calligraphic stroke because Wang Xianzhi grasped its profound meaning. As a result, one word frequently followed the previous line.

Once integrated with qi, the artwork's shi becomes compatible. The spirit of *Ba Ren Ji Shui* reflects the intertwining of the qi of tenacity, hard work, and defiance. The shi of the characters' expressions and gestures is expressed organically, with a delicate balance of bending and extension. *Ba Ren Ji Shui*, set in Chongqing, is located on cliffs overlooking a hundred feet of steps. Clouds and gas emerge from the curved disk along the shi of the landscape, but without complementary qi, it fails to reflect the same magnificence seen in Northern Song Dynasty painter Guo Xi's *Early Spring*, which depicts towering mountains aided by smoke and clouds. Similarly, Northern Song painter Jing Hao's *Kuanglu Tu* reflects the grandeur of the mountains with steep ink strokes that cut sharply through the mountain clouds. Xu (2010, p. 185) also remarked that the brush and ink affect the movement of qi, saying, "Where the heavy ink is, be sure to pause, for not all brush strokes can blend. Without heaviness, there will be no momentum." The sharp and potent depiction of the mountainous landscape in *Ba Ren Ji Shui*—the contrast between brush and ink and the crumbling cliff faces of the rocks—are all elements of shi and manifestations of the qi of brush and ink. According to Rošker and Suhadolnik (2014, p. 248), Xu Beihong returned to using brush and ink to create Chinese art, striving to combine the Eastern national spirit with Western realism (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Ba Ren Ji Shui* Ink Draft

Though *Ba Ren Ji Shui* appears to be a static representation, its visual structure is determined by a continuous trend of *qi*. From a Western perspective, the composition takes on an S-shape, zigzagging upward to depict the image of a wave with three twists and turns that rise and fall. The theory of ancient and modern painting remains consistent, and its essence can be sensed, as the painting spirals upward from the bottom, expanding the visual space and creating a dynamic image. This static artwork combines three landscapes with a long stone staircase, emphasizing the height and steepness of the riverbank, embodying the “ten thousand miles of shi,” as noted by Ming Dynasty philosopher Wang Fuzhi. The arrangement of elements in the painting creates the illusion of movement, although it remains still. From the perspective of Chinese art, the image resembles a comic strip, divided into three sections connected by stone stairs. Alternatively, the composition can be understood using Guo Xi’s “three distances” method of Chinese landscape painting: High Distance, Deep Distance, and Level Distance, which depict the flow of events, giving the image a sense of visual movement and allowing the viewer’s perspective to shift, enhancing the shi impression. The dynamics of shi, such as the direction of the mountain range, are influenced by the viewer’s shifting perspective.

Su Shi, a prominent Song Dynasty poet, calligrapher, and painter, observed similar dynamics, saying, “The boulder stands a thousand feet on its side, like a fierce beast or a strange ghost, with a fierce desire to overpower viewers.” The seven figures in *Ba Ren Ji Shui* are shown in distinct dynamic poses, demonstrating the continuous flow of events as they fetch water, struggle uphill, and move quickly and steadily. As Qing Dynasty painter Da Chongguang stated, “If you gain momentum, you will act with ease, and everything will fall into place; if you lose momentum, you will struggle to maintain balance, and everything will fall apart.” The entire picture may seem casually executed, but its true goal is to create momentum. The slightest nuances can alter potential, and the degree of attention given to each phase determines how cohesive the momentum is.

Ba Ren Ji Shui was accomplished almost entirely with a single stroke of *qi*; the classroom lacked a long table, so the paper was held for Xu as he worked. He began with a simple layout using charcoal strips, outlining the figures before waving the brush over each piece of Guizhou Duyun leather paper to complete the background (Ai, 1980). Xu’s mastery of *qi* is evident—his initial vision was gradually refined, brewing overtime before finally achieving unity of subject and object, local and general, within the momentum of the composition’s spirit. Thus, painting begins with the intention behind the first stroke (Tang, 2012, p. 102). Consequently, *Ba Ren Ji Shui* and *Poor Woman* were both created in the classroom without preliminary sketches because the concept had already matured in Xu’s mind (Ai, 1980). Xu (2010, p. 137) emphasized the importance of precision in teaching sketching, highlighting the need for mimeographs and accurate depiction of energy in character paintings. The artist, following Qing Dynasty painter Zheng Banqiao’s theory of “eyes in the bamboo,” takes on the role of “hands of the bamboo,” even when depicting figures surrounded by bamboo branches or plum blossoms. Gu Ningyuan’s *Introduction to Painting from the Ming Dynasty* states, “Charm is either within the realm or outside it, taken from the four seasons of cold, heat, sunshine, rain, and obscurity, not just a buildup of ink.” Gu Ningyuan’s comment that *qi* is both inside and outside the realm hints at another dimension that exists beyond the physical one. Similarly, the figures in *Ba Ren Ji Shui* seem to point beyond the picture, inviting viewers to contemplate what lies beyond. The meaning conveyed by the painting’s potential is an embodiment of Qing Dynasty painter Shi Tao’s “theory of one painting,” where a single painting gives rise to many possibilities.

3.2 *Shi with Emotion*

Emotion is the vitality that animates an artwork. It is the momentum generated and formed by the strong emotional force expressed in narrative and lyrical texts (Di, 2002, p. 102). In traditional Chinese aesthetics, *qi* and emotion are interconnected. As Liu Xie, a prominent literary theorist during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, noted in *Wenxin Diaolong*, “Emotions contain wind, just as forms contain air.” Emotion is the *qi* that emerges from the structure of shi. It integrates the viewer’s emotions, creating motion within the artwork that reflects the artist’s emotional movement. Emotion encompasses the contributions of both the artist and the viewer. Artistic creation is a two-way exchange, not merely the self-expression of one party; only works that achieve this connection hold meaning and significance.

Xu Beihong’s artwork conveys his empathy for the suffering of the people and his historical responsibility to transform space through painting, depicting their struggles. According to Hearn & Smith (2001, p. 41), Xu exhibited a strong nationalist sentiment. This is evident in the inscription on the scroll of *Ba Ren Ji Shui*: “It is hard to bear the sight of the Sichuan people accustomed to carrying loads and climbing steep paths for miles,” where Xu expressed his distress over the arduous lives of the Sichuan people in Chongqing. The inscription describes their hardships, with each grain of rice symbolizing the results of their labor, obtained through great effort, highlighting the suffering involved. Feng (1980) noted that in some of Xu’s paintings, there is a strong expression of the oppressed people’s desire for liberation, as well as their will to achieve it.

Ba Ren Ji Shui stirs patriotic sentiment, with Xu advocating for art that reflects the passion of the sad and compassionate. Xu Beihong's concern extended beyond art. He worked to rescue Li Zongjin and other progressive teachers captured by the Kuomintang. This demonstrates Xu's sublime personality, which went beyond art to include care for people and objects associated with art (Rošker & Suhadolnik, 2014, p. 248). He believed that artists should take responsibility for society and engage with the times, reflecting this belief in his work (Xu, 2010, p. 33).

The painting also symbolizes the Chinese people's brave response to adversity during the Anti-Japanese War. Zhu Liang, the first collector of Ba Ren Ji Shui, remarked that Xu Beihong's patriotism ignited his own patriotic heart (Zhao & Zhang, 2019). Xu Beihong's best-known works, such as Jiufang Gao, Yu Gong Moves the Mountain, and Put Down Your Whip, convey similar patriotic emotions. Bhowmik (2015) and Andrews (2012, p. 123) note that these works were created during the Second Sino-Japanese War, offering metaphors for the perseverance required during that time.

Xu Beihong expressed deep sympathy for the working people's suffering, grief over the nation's peril, and admiration for their indomitable spirit in resisting Japanese aggression. His depiction of a neighing, head-high steed in Ba Ren Ji Shui captures the spirit of the Chinese people's resistance, a sentiment praised by Mao Zedong. Premier Zhou also noted that Xu's paintings were closely linked to politics (Feng, 1980). Xu Beihong traveled to Southeast Asia during the war to solicit donations and sell paintings to raise money for the resistance (Figure 4), reflecting his sense of patriotic duty (Xu, 2010, p. 163).



Figure 4. 1945 letter initiated by Xu Beihong and others concerning the improvement of soldiers' living conditions, held in Chongqing Archives

Another key element in Xu Beihong's work is the audience's emotional response. Abrams (1985, p. 60) uses the terms "Mirror" and "Lamp" to describe the role of the artist's mind, likening it to a mirror that reflects the external world and a lamp that illuminates the inner one. Many scholars agree that Xu's realist approach, as seen in Ba Ren Ji Shui, effectively conveys its key ideas through clear visual language. The viewer's emotions connect with the artist's, allowing for empathy and resonance. This connection fulfills the shi of the artist's emotions, demonstrating that when superficial elements are stripped away, what remains is the emotional core. Without this connection, an artwork cannot fully resonate with the audience.

4. Conclusion

In Ba Ren Ji Shui, shi emerges as the most prominent and defining element, shaping both the external composition and the internal structure of the artwork. Xu Beihong's masterful use of shi reflects not only his deep understanding of traditional Chinese aesthetics but also his ability to infuse the work with his personal temperament, vision, and artistic skill. Art, as demonstrated in Ba Ren Ji Shui, is not merely a synthesis of historical aesthetic traditions; it is also a reflection of the artist's individuality and creative force. Each manifestation of shi carries the unique stylistic imprint of its creator, offering a glimpse into the artist's inner universe, where personal strength and insight transform external reality into a distinct artistic expression.

The patriotic sentiments that permeate Ba Ren Ji Shui evoke a profound emotional response in the viewer. Even

when the artist's intentions are not explicitly realized, the artwork leaves a lasting impression, inviting the audience to connect deeply with the laboring figures depicted. The emotional resonance and sincerity conveyed in Xu Beihong's work transcend the surface, becoming an enduring reflection of the viewer's own response. In Chinese aesthetics, shi, qi, and emotion are intricately intertwined, each contributing to the dynamic interplay between the artwork, the artist, and the viewer.

Ultimately, Ba Ren Ji Shui exemplifies how the power of shi extends beyond the visual space of the painting. It captures not only the physical representation of laboring people but also the inner vitality and momentum of their lives, firmly aligning Xu Beihong's masterpiece with the core principles of Chinese aesthetics. Through its vivid portrayal of human struggle and perseverance, the painting becomes a timeless embodiment of both the individual and collective spirit, resonating with audiences across generations.

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