

# He Shaoji's Postural Way of Writing and Psychological Frustration and Adjustment: Case Study on Calligraphy Literature From a Psychological Approach

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## Abstract

This paper is to try to study calligraphy literature from a psychological approach. In the future, calligraphy psychology will have a vast space for development in the study of the learning psychology, educational psychology, creative psychology, as well as psychotherapy studies and other areas. Based on frustration theory, the paper explores the close relationship between He Shaoji's way of writing with bent wrist and the frustration in his political career, and points out that his postural way of writing which combines the bent wrist and the force of whole body is a compensation for frustration due to his dismissal from office, as well as the technical basis for his change in calligraphy style in his late years.

**Key words:** Calligraphy psychology; He Shaoji; Bent wrist; Frustration

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## INTRODUCTION

As everyone knows, there are always a lot of setbacks in life, big or small. As people are different individuals, the solutions vary when they face setbacks. It's the same with artists, for example, Chinese calligraphers. Facing setbacks

in life, painter Xu Wei of the Ming Dynasty committed suicide for nine times, but he did not die and finally became famous for his stipple calligraphy style. At the age of 56, Gao Fenghan's right hand was crippled due to wandering arthritis, but he used his left hand in calligraphy creation, and shined through history with left-hand handwriting. In the period of the Republic of China, confronted with poverty in life and turbulence of the times, the seal cutting expert Qiao Dazhuang chose to commit suicide in 1948, which is an alternative way to face setbacks. Perhaps, for artists, the best method of adjustment in the face of frustration is to change the techniques in artistic creation. He Shaoji resolved the clashes in life and worked off the sense of failure with the changes in art techniques. It is safe to say that the frustration confronting He Shaoji and the ensuing adjustment demonstrate the positive effect of psychotherapy.

## 1. PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON FRUSTRATION AND ITS INSPIRATION ON THIS STUDY

Frustration theory is one aspect of motivation theory, which mainly studies the content, characteristics, formation and causes of frustration and methods to solve problems. Social psychology assumes that after an individual meets setbacks, his emotional state arising from the failure in satisfaction of motives would find an outlet. Individual behavioral responses after setbacks have many types: In addition to aggression which is a common response, there is regression, compensation, repression and the like. When an individual suffers setbacks in a particular field or activity, he will change direction to achieve success in other activities, so as to compensate for the lost inner balance resulted from failure, and this is called compensation. Compensation is not only restricted to the individuals concerned, sometimes when it is

difficult to make up for some deficiencies, people who suffer from frustrations might turn to their loved ones to get the compensation. (Social Psychology Editing Group, 2003, pp.127-128)

With life experience of He Shaoji, it can be found that his frustration in political career begins with his dismissal from office at the age of 55 in Sichuan. After that, He Shaoji once had repressed emotions, and the idea to retire, but in the process of mental adjustment, it is the compensation psychology that plays the main role. He used the change in art techniques to compensate for the pain of his dismissal. Therefore, it is appropriate to use frustration theory to examine the mood of He Shaoji in his last months in Sichuan. Likewise, this approach is perhaps universal in methodology to study the psychology of other calligraphers in history.

The sentence that can best express He Shaoji's state of mind is in the poem "I will visit Mountain Emei"—"How mad the temper of the ape and deer is, running fast as if flying in the vast." The ape and deer here are a symbol of the free spirit. After being dismissed, He Shaoji was extremely depressed. Seeking the freedom in life almost became his dream. Although deep down in heart, he was unwilling to accept failure in the political career, he could do nothing to change the fact. At that time, He Shaoji could only return to nature, and get the spiritual comfort in imagination, while seeking freedom. Apes have very long arms, which give them the freedom and deftness when climbing. In his poem "I have not written poems for a long time and would try to make one today in the boat", He Shaoji said, "My arms are like those of the baby horse, reluctant to be restrained by the halter". Like horse, he is unwilling to be bound and restricted. In his lyrical poems, readers can find his aspirations and pursuits. Perhaps, He Shaoji's method of using bent wrist is a silent revolt of his dismissal from office. After experiencing dismissal and sightseeing in Mountain Emei, He Shaoji regained his inner peace and artistic insight, and his handwriting also became more inclined to freedom. Perhaps this is the psychological reasons behind the change in his way of holding the brush.

He Shaoji believed that the bent wrist should be used while writing with a brush, because it can get the strength of the whole body. When he wrote "Zhang Xuan Epitaph", he said:

While copywriting every time, I will bend and hang my wrist, with the force of the whole body, which is the only way to form a character. In the process, I sweat all over. So I think that calligraphers in the past might not have used so much force when they wrote with a brush.

In Postscript of *Fight for Seat*, he said:

I once wrote with the soft brush on stiff paper without stopping, and my literary talent impressed the court then. Now the ape arms became the end of crossbow, and I could only talk about the theory with the younger people.

He Shaoji's emotional experiences in the fifth year under Emperor Xianfeng's reign coincide with the change in his way of holding the brush. From the change in his mentality, we can better understand the adjustment of He Shaoji in handwriting method during the month following his dismissal from office. To sum up, there is no evidence to prove that He Shaoji deliberately bent his wrist with violation of physical laws. However, we can find that this method conforms to his own physical condition and psychological needs, that is to say, he naturally selected the bent wrist method based on his actual physical and mental condition, and kept this method from that year on, and this is also confirmed in the style of his other calligraphy works.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HE SHAOJI'S BENT-WRIST WRITING AND EVOLUTION OF HIS CALLIGRAPHY STYLE

Ergonomics, also known as engineering psychology, is to explore how people at work or under operating situation can make people, equipment, operating environments, operating methods and various conditions cooperate most reasonably and effectively in order to reach the requirements of the operation. Some researchers believe that the movements in handwriting can be divided into manipulative movements as delicate fingers grasp and move the brush, transport movements, such as wrist transport, elbow transport and arm transport movements, and postural movements, for example, full-body or half-body movement to meet the requirements of the movement in handwriting.

### 2.1 Psychological Classification of He Shaoji's Techniques in Handwriting

People in ancient time had various methods to hold the brush in handwriting. In general, modern calligraphers prefer to the method to use five fingers to grasp the brush, which was passed down by Lu Xisheng of the Tang Dynasty. In the "Admonitions Scroll", the method used by Nü Shi, Mi Fu and Dong Qichang is transport movement. In the "Proofreading in the North Qi Dynasty" (Bei Qi Jiao Shu Tu), the method used by the proofreader and Su Dongpo is manipulative movement, while the method used by Huai Su is postural movement.

The history records of postural movement of the brush are mainly concerned with the cursive script. Huai Su once wrote cursive script fervently after he was drunk. "After a sudden scream for a while, thousands of characters were written on the wall". Undoubtedly, Huai Su used postural movement. There is a saying that

<sup>1</sup> Refer to the related articles of the author to explore He Shaoji's bent wrist method, see *Hundred Schools in Arts*, 2011, 2.

Zhang Xu learned to write from the sword dance of Aunt Gongsun, while the method to move the brush obtained from sword dance is also postural movement. There were also studies on calligraphy to differentiate and analyse this method in the Qing Dynasty. Cheng Yaotian, Bao Shichen and some other calligraphers also use this method.

Different methods will produce different styles of work, so in the study of calligraphy techniques, the methods to hold the brush often become a necessary topic of concern in Calligraphy. On the basis of brush-holding methods, brush movement and stroke become major techniques for calligraphy study. According to relevant psychology research, He Shaoji's Bent-wrist handwriting method and full body force belong to postural movement.

He Shaoji's method with "Suspended arm and bent wrist" is closest to the concept of 'full body force' in postural movement. His bent wrist refers to the fixed posture of wrist; the wrist doesn't make an active movement in the writing process, and it moves according to the movement of the arm. Such "full body force" should include the way of using the body to push the shoulder and arm to move while writing with a brush.

He Shaoji's method of writing could make him sweat all over. It was just because he relied on the body's movement excessively to move the brush to write. A more normal and natural postural "full body force" handwriting method should combine the movement of the body with the movement of shoulder and arm to drive the movement of the brush, which is what is meant by "the full body force" mentioned above. (Gao, 1986, pp.60-61)

## 2.2 Variable Techniques and Different Styles: He Shaoji's Postural Movement of Brush and His Calligraphy Style

He Shaoji emulated Yan Zhenqing in his early learning of calligraphy. Yang Han says "The calligraphy of He Shaoji was an emulation of Yan Qingchen's (Yan Zhenqing's) works. With decades of skill, learned from Zhuan (seal character) and Li (official script), it reaches perfection." The theory of "full body force" is practiced throughout He Shaoji's life, which is the so-called "concentration of the force of the body on the finger":

He Shaoji began to read 'Shuo Wen Jie Zi' and write seal characters at twenty. He visited mountains to see North Monuments day and night, and practiced copywriting with suspended arm and the force of whole body on the finger so as to make the characters full of life. When he wrote a few characters with this method on purpose, he felt exhausted. He said he has got the secret unknown.<sup>2</sup>

Sha Menghai believed that in He Shaoji's official script works, "There is a true spirit in his calligraphy works. His way of moving the brush is very deft, natural and unrestrained. The characters look very scratchy, but in fact, he could not tolerate the slightest slackness while writing. As to the grand circling point, it's not ordinary people that could reach his achievement. He Shaoji paid attention to the posture and strength of the brush. He not

only stressed the strength and profundity, but also stressed the rhythm and the grace. These effects depend on the use of the middle stroke which is typical of bent-wrist method. He said:

The character would be round with vigor if it is written with the middle stroke. With one consistent brush stroke to the end, how could the character be not dignified, how could it be not graceful, how could it be not vigorously, and not rhythmical? These are the necessity. When you hold the brush, you should lift your breath above the navel, look higher, and move your brush in zigzag lines and send your strength down into the paper. Only in this way, could the character be vigorous and graceful. To make the characters really round with vigor, it's extremely hard.

The combination of the bent wrist posture with the full body force, that is, postural movement of the brush, was He Shaoji's main technique of moving the brush after his dismissal from office. With the signature "Yuan Sou" as the dividing line, the difference between his earlier and later calligraphy style is very obvious. And the track of his psychological change is also revealed.

First, the point and stroke of his former calligraphy works are flat-based, and the curve is mostly convex outward to form arcs; his later works use more curves which are mostly concave inward to gain force.

Second, in his earlier works, he frequently used pauses with the lifting and pressing of the brush as well as flat spreading, but in his later works, twisted brush is obvious.

Third, his earlier works are somewhat smooth and flashy; while the later works tend to be jerky and heavy.

Fourth, in his earlier works, He Shaoji tended to imitate the shape of the characters from ancient masters; while in his later works, the creativeness is very prominent.

In his fellow townsman Zeng Guofan's opinion, He Shaoji's postural movement of the brush is in harmony with the law of Yin and Yang, which won the appreciation of Zeng Guofan as he said:

He Shaoji and I have a lot in common, and he said I knew the real source of knowledge and should not abandon my effort in learning. I always say that all the things and theories are related to Qian and Kun. Taking calligraphy for example: if the brush moves with vigor, the characters would be vigorous, graceful and rhythmical, and that's Qian. If the characters are written with delicate structure, sophisticated norms and appropriate length, that's Kun. Qian is regarded as vigor and Kun as structure. Li (rituals) and Yue (music) cannot be separated, that's the same reason. Yue's essence is Qian, and Li's essence is Kun. Write with grace and ease, and there is true strength in characters, which is the meaning of Yue; write with coherence and appropriate change, and this is the meaning of Li. When Zizhen (He Shaoji) and I talked about this, Zizhen held the same view. He said his achievements actually had benefited from this.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> He Shaoji. *Works after writing to Mr. Deng Wanbo*.

<sup>3</sup> The letter to the Younger brother in September in Daoguang 29<sup>th</sup> year. Complete collection of Zeng Guofan's works (Volume XIX). *Family Letter I*, 35.

However, Yang Jun thought He Shaoji was too obsessive with this technique:

He uses bent wrist exclusively so that when he wrote with a brush, the space is limited to the small room between his two hands in front of his chest, and that's why he could not write bigger characters well. The straight stroke is not straight, and the horizontal stroke is not horizontal. Especially in brush movement, he liked to use the bold and unconstrained stroke typical of People in the Song Dynasty to write with simple and rustic style which is typical of calligraphers in the Qin and Han Dynasties. He wanted to imitate, but failed. And he used twisted brush with many turns in movement. This is what we really regret for. (Yang, 1985)

Even so, his postural movement of brush is widespread and well passed down. And even today many people learning calligraphy still use this way of writing.

The change of He Shaoji's calligraphy style depends on his early learning and cultivation in the calligraphy, and it accidentally achieved success through his change in the method of holding and moving the brush in the handwriting. The postural movement of the brush, the bent-wrist writing and full body force are the main techniques contributing to the change in his calligraphy style. Changing art techniques to deal with frustration in life and career has academic value as a case in research on frustration psychology. This kind of adjustment method, in nature, is to seek compensation after frustration. More examples of this kind could be found in history of art. Undoubtedly, for artists, it is also one of the methods for psychological transformation in artistic creation.

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## CONCLUSION

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Calligraphy psychology is an interdisciplinary subject which is an inevitable product of the development of Calligraphy and Psychology study.

Using conventional wisdom to discuss calligraphy behavior could provide a starting point for the researchers to think and explore, but for further in-depth study, it is bound to reveal its serious limitations. This is an inevitable phenomenon, because there is basic difference between the traditional calligraphy theories based on experience and the psychology research based on experiments. (Yang, 1985)

Using psychological methods to study the issues in calligraphy cannot only explain the calligraphy phenomena, but also summarize the laws in calligraphy, and it plays a positive role on people's psychological adjustment and psychotherapy.

How to make further study on the calligraphy psychology, especially experimental calligraphy psychology would become one of our goals in the future. Undoubtedly, the experimental study of psychology will provide more effective ways in empirical research. However, as Mr. Gao Shangren said: "In theory, although we can explore the psychological behavior of handwriting from different angles, the actual research work is still limited." Calligraphy psychology research calls for more cross study by scholars in both psychology and calligraphy. Calligraphers in the psychology field and psychology enthusiasts in calligraphy field are perhaps the main force to solve this problem.

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