Empty and Full

THE LANGUAGE OF CHINESE PAINTING

FRANÇOIS CHENG
Translated by Michael H. Kohn

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PREFACE

The aim of this book is to comprehend Chinese painting as a constituted language and to grasp the principles by which it functions. The approach taken is primarily structural and not historical. I am, of course, not unaware that there is a history of Chinese painting that has been the subject of many works of scholarship, that Chinese painting has passed through various stages of evolution (particularly in the direction of the predominance of the painting of the scholars, whose ideal is the projection of a more inward and personal vision, designated by the term *hsieh-i*), and that as a result all the factors we observe in it did not come into existence at the same time. But I have made an effort to extricate our focus for once from the purely chronological concerns of a detailed recording of successive events.

When all is said and done, the Chinese pictorial art, having arisen in a specific context, grew like a tree. With its roots deep in ideographic writing (which through callig-

raphy made the use of the brush important and promoted the tendency to transform elements of nature into signs) and with a definite cosmology as its framework, this art enjoyed from the beginning the conditions necessary for its spread, even if certain of its virtualities were not revealed until later on. A global analytic approach is also justified because the concepts inherent in Chinese aesthetic thought—such as unities composed of combined pairs and the discrimination of various levels—lend themselves naturally to structural analysis. It is well known that Chinese aesthetics, being based on an organicist conception of the universe, proposed an art that would strive to re-create a total microcosm, in which the unifying action of breath-spirit plays the leading role, and in which emptiness, far from being synonymous with vagueness or arbitrariness, is the inner locus where the network of *vital breaths* is established. We see here a system that proceeds by the integration of successive additions rather than by discontinuity. The art of the brushstroke, which painters raised to the utmost level of refinement, by giving form to the one and the many through identification with the original breath and all its metamorphoses, contributed to the continuity of this tirelessly pursued discipline of meaning.

Painting, which is thought in action, thus became one of the highest expressions of Chinese spirituality. Through painting, the Chinese have sought to reveal the mystery of creation and to create for themselves an authentic way of life. From this perspective, the present study perhaps has ultimately to do with something that goes beyond the mere concerns of art.

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I would like to express great gratitude to my master Jaques Lacan, who caused me to rediscover Lao-tzu and Shih-t'ao; to Pierre Ryckmans, who authorized me to cite large extracts from his masterful translation *Propos sur la peinture* (Remarks on painting) by Shih-t'ao; to François Wahl and Jean-Luc Giribone, whose challenging texts have been indispensable to me; and to Nicole Lefèvre, Janine Lescarmontier, Daniel Glorel, Brigitte Demaria, and all those who participated in making this book into a viable text.

Paul Demiéville, who read and corrected the French manuscript of this work, departed from our midst while it was still at the press. I respectfully dedicate this modest labor to his memory.

Empty and Full

Introduction

IN CHINA, PAINTING OCCUPIES the supreme position among all the arts.[1] It is the object of a veritable mystique, for in the eyes of the Chinese, the pictorial art is the one best able to reveal the mystery of the universe. Compared with poetry, the other pinnacle of Chinese culture, painting, through the original space that it embodies and through the vital breaths that it arouses, seems far more apt to go beyond description of the spectacles of creation and to enter into the very gestures of creation. Though it stood outside the religious current, which by tradition was primarily Buddhist, painting was itself considered a sacred practice.

The basis of Chinese painting is a fundamental philosophy that holds precise views of cosmology, of human destiny, and of the relationship between the human being and the universe. Painting represents a specific way of life for

putting this philosophy into practice. Its purpose is to create not only a framework of representation but also a medium in which true life is possible. In China, art and the art of life are one and the same.

Chinese aesthetic thought always envisions the beautiful in its relationship with the true. In judging a work of art, the tradition distinguishes three degrees of excellence: the *neng-p'in* (work of accomplished talent), the *miao-p'in* (work of marvelous essence), and the *shen-p'in* (work of divine spirit), which is the highest degree.[2] In defining *neng-p'in* and *miao-p'in*, consideration is given to numerous qualifications sometimes connected with the notion of beauty, but the term *shen-p'in* is applied only to a work of art whose ineffable quality seems to link it to the original universe. A Chinese artist aspires to the ideal of realizing a living microcosm in which it is possible for the macrocosm to function.

The aim of this book is to present the essential aspects of this aesthetic philosophy. My point of view and method are semiological. I do not want merely to translate or provide commentary on this or that theoretical treatise. Nor do I want just to enumerate technical terms used in connection with the art of painting. The theoretical treatises were produced in a particular cultural context, and they have an implicit aspect to them that requires elucidation. Similarly, technical terms are not isolated elements. They make up an organic whole with distinct levels and laws of combination. My concern is to bring out the internal structures and principles of this system of thought and this practical discipline.

The first part of this work provides a general introduction. Starting with the central notion of emptiness, I examine the organization of the various interrelated concepts through which the pictorial art acquires its complete meaning. In the second part I explore the theoretical and practical work of a particular painter. I hope this will help the reader to see how the Chinese art of painting really works. A few passages in the second part that repeat content from the first part seemed to me useful, even indispensable, because they enable us to approach certain concepts from more than one angle.

In addition to its theoretical concerns, this book has the practical goal of helping the reader appreciate Chinese painting. It will therefore be useful to present here the main historical outlines of Chinese painting, starting with the empire established two centuries before our era. Let us first recall that the long history of the Chinese empire includes a succession of dynasties and alternating periods of unity and division. The Ch'in and Han dynasties (221 BCE to CE) was a period in which unity was achieved, but they were followed by a period of troubles resulting from internal conflicts and foreign invasions. This period (420–589) is known as that of the Northern and Southern dynasties. The north of China was occupied by non-Chinese "barbarians" who embraced Buddhism and became assimilated into Chinese culture.

It was not until the great T'ang dynasty (618–907) that China was reunified. But after three centuries, this dynasty also sank into anarchy. The era of division that followed was known as the Five Dynasties period (907–960). This era was ended by the advent of the Sung dynasty (960–1279). The Sung dynasty reached a level of cultural brilliance comparable to that of the T'ang, but it was soon undermined by the unceasing attacks of the Liao and Chin tribes and was forced to withdraw to the south of the Yang-tzu River. After the decline of the Sung dynasty, China was too weakened to resist the overwhelming attack

of the Mongols, who founded a new dynasty in China, the Yüan (1271–1368). The Yüan dynasty was succeeded by the last two great dynasties of the empire, the Ming (1368–1644) and the Ch'ing (1644–1912), which were founded by Manchus, who were rapidly assimilated by Chinese culture.

Throughout the course of this history, painting was undergoing continuous development. It was conditioned by events, yet it also followed its own laws of transformation. The periods of division and disorder, because of the relaxation of mores and the self-questioning they brought with them, were no less propitious for artistic creation than other periods. Two currents, which fed each other, animated Chinese painting: a religious current, marked by the painting born of Taoism and later Buddhism, and a current that could be called secular but, as we have said, nonetheless constituted a spiritual approach. It is this latter current, viewed as the application of an original aesthetic philosophy, that will be the object of our study.

It is generally agreed that the first great painter known by name in the history of China was Ku K'ai-chih (345–411) of the Chin dynasty (265–420). This painter, whose work exhibits astonishing authority and technical mastery, raised painting to the level of primary worth at which it has remained ever since. His appearance on the scene was by no means purely fortuitous, but was preceded by a tradition of pictorial art that was already ancient. Though written documents and material remain, we know that throughout the feudal Chou dynasty (1121–256 BCE), throughout the Warring Kingdoms period (453–222 BCE), and throughout the Ch'in and Han dynasties (221 BCE–220 CE), palaces and temples, as well as royal tombs, were decorated by sumptuous mural paintings with religious and moral themes. We also possess a number of paintings

on silk and a significant sampling of engravings on brick, which afford us a view of an art that is original in its treatment of brushstrokes as well as in its approach to composition.

After the Han dynasty crumbled, the Chinese empire remained divided and menaced by foreign enemies and failed to achieve a stable peace until the time of the Chin dynasty. This situation of disorder and crisis provoked significant developments of thought. With Confucianism temporarily in decline, neo-Taoism and Buddhism, which was newly introduced to China, reigned supreme. These intellectual movements in turn brought with them a veritable explosion in the various domains of artistic creation: calligraphy, painting, sculpture, architecture, and so on.

In the realm of painting, Ku K'ai-chih towered over his period. He was able to integrate in his work the achievements of the past with new elements, notably technical advances in calligraphy and the bold imaginativeness of Buddhist art. Through the synthesis he brought about, Ku prefigured the later development of Chinese painting, in which several intellectual currents cohabit, constantly interpenetrating and cross-fertilizing each other. Unfortunately, nothing remains of Ku's mural paintings. We can only guess at the grandeur of his art with the help of a plan he wrote for a painting called "Note on the Painting of Cloud Terrace Mountain" and two famous scrolls that were attributed to him only later: *The Goddess of the River Luo,* preserved in China, and *Admonition to the Ladies of the Court,* preserved in the British Museum.

After Ku, in the time of the Northern and Southern dynasties (420–589), when China was cut in two, and during the short Sui dynasty (581–618), there were several outstanding painters—Lu T'an-wei, Tsung Ping, Chang Seng-yü, and Chan Tzu-ch'ien—but we know of their

work only through the writings of later historians, particularly through the *Li-tai-ming-hua chi* (History of painting under the successive dynasties) by Chang Yen-yuan of the T'ang period. There is, however, one famous painting, *Springtime Promenade,* attributed to Chan Tzu-ch'ien, that is generally considered the premier work of landscape painting in the history of Chinese art.

The T'ang Period (618–907)

With the advent of the T'ang dynasty the classical period truly begins. Unprecedented prosperity followed on the heels of the reunification of the country and the reorganization of the state. An extraordinary creative effervescence began to manifest in all artistic domains: poetry, music, dance, calligraphy, and painting.

The style of this period is characterized by the alliance of two apparently contradictory demands. On the one hand, we find a need for rigor, shown in a concern with establishing definite criteria for and codes of rules. On the other hand, we see a seeking after variety, attested to by the many coexisting tendencies that have their ideological roots in the three principal intellectual currents of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. This is actually only an apparent contradiction, because the fixing of criteria and codes was done for the sole purpose of establishing a sort of compendium of all possible forms of expression, which artists were invited to contemplate in order to freely orient their own expressions on completely conscious principles of creation.

Considering matters from the point of view of technique alone, the explorations carried out and the advances achieved in the course of the preceding centuries now permitted painters to attain a full maturity of means. For example, in the art of the brushstroke, which is fundamental to the technique of the Chinese pictorial art, artists now had at their disposal a complete range of strokes of different types, often with vivid metaphorical names: the rat's head, the serpent's tail, the pulled (carpenter's) nail, the little-hatchet style, the combed-out hemp, and so on. As time went on, this list was enriched by further nuances, and finally, toward the end of the Ming period, it reached an extreme level of refinement. The art of color also underwent marked evolution. The most highly valued harmonies were those of *green and blue* and *jade and gold.* However, painting with india ink became established at this time and, through the influence of the poet and painter Wang Wei (699–759), achieved a style that was both highly effective and subtle. The rules of composition tended toward increasing rigor and complexity in the art of the fresco and in painting on silk.

During the T'ang period, three tendencies in art, corresponding to the traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, were already beginning to take form: the realist, the expressionist, and the impressionist. These three tendencies were to animate the entire history of Chinese art. The realist tendency was marked at its outset by the influence of the brothers Yen Li-teh and Yen Li-pen, who flourished between 627 and 683, and who excelled in the genre of the edifying portrait. A little later on, the great painter Li Sseu-hsün (651–716) and his son Li Chao-tao (fl. 670–730) turned the focus toward representative landscape painting that was at once detailed and grandiose. The same realist lineage also includes Ts'ao Pa and Han Kan, specialists in painting horses, as well as Chang Hsün and Chou Fang, who were celebrated for their genre paintings.

The great master of the expressionist tendency was Wu Tao-tzu (701–792). A highly colorful personality, he devoted his energies to the painting of human figures, decorating many Taoist and Buddhist temples, as well as to landscape painting. Making use of a technique in which broad brushstrokes produce vigorous, rhythmic movements of line, he was an ardent partisan of rapid and spontaneous execution. Wu's best known disciple, Lu Leng-chia, was also an important figure in the expressionist approach, as was Wang Hsia, who introduced the technique known as "ink splatter," and who, it seems, could never paint except in a state of total drunkenness.

I have used the adjective *impressionist* to describe the third major tendency in T'ang painting only for lack of a better term. The term refers to a style peculiar to Chinese painting in which delicate, sometimes dissolving strokes are executed using subtly graded intensities of ink. This style aims primarily at catching the tonalities of a landscape in their infinite nuances, at capturing the secret vibrations of objects bathed in the invisible breaths which animate the universe. This type of painting seeks to convey a *state of the soul,* and it is always a result of a long meditation. It is therefore not at all surprising that it was Wang Wei, a poet, a painter, and a great adept of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism, who inaugurated this approach.

The Five Dynasties Period (907–960)

The intense artistic creativity begun under the T'ang was continued and deepened under the Sung. But between the T'ang and the Sung periods was a brief interregnum, known as the Five Dynasties period, that was equally decisive for the development of Chinese painting. This period

of division and ruthless struggle for power, in which small, ephemeral dynasties succeeded one another, produced some of the greatest artists in China's history. Their works reveal the most elevated visions and were to exercise a formative influence on all Chinese painting to come.

Living amid precarious, often tragic, conditions, these artists were able to find in art an answer to their most urgent questions. They expressed the deep mysteries of the universe and human desire through their grand landscapes, thus inaugurating the great tradition of landscape painting that became the main current in Chinese painting.

Some of these masters devoted their energies to capturing the bare horizons of northern China; others focused on the more varied and luxuriant landscapes of the South. The best representatives of the northern school were certainly Ching Hao (fl. 905–958) and Kuan T'ung (fl. 907–923). Their work was admirably continued by Li Ch'eng (fl. 960–990), Fan K'uan (fl. 990–1030), and to a certain extent, by Kuo Hsi (fl. 1020–1075)—these last being among the greatest painters of the Northern Sung. Among the painters of the southern school were Chü Jan (fl. 960–980) and Tung Yuan (fl. 932–976), who were active before the decline of the Northern Sung.

Landscape painting was not the only prominent type of painting. Court painting, for example, had its heyday in the kingdoms of the Southern T'ang and the Western Shu. Because they were geographically outside the center of things, these two regions were at relative peace during these times. Several emperors from these regions, who were lovers of art or artists themselves, created favorable conditions for artistic creation. They founded academies of painting that would serve as models for the famous Sung Academy of Painting. Among the painters of these kingdoms who achieved fame were Chou Wen-chü and Ku

Hung-chung, known for paintings of the human figure, and Hsü Hsi and Huang Ch'üan, known for paintings of flowers and animals.

The Sung Period (960–1279)

The real golden age of Chinese painting begins with the Sung. Following in the footsteps of the artists of the T'ang and Five Dynasties periods, the Sung painters elevated Chinese pictorial art to a degree of refinement and perfection never before attained. The unique richness of this period is comparable to that of the quattrocento in Italy.

The history of the Sung dynasty is marked by the brutal division that followed the invasion of northern China by Chin tribes from Central Asia. It is usually divided into two periods: the Northern Sung (960–1126) and the Southern Sung (1127–1279). The restored unity of the country was a primary factor in the astonishing creative dynamism that came to the fore in all domains of culture during the Northern Sung. The great currents of Chinese thought, so distinct during the T'ang period, now interpenetrated each other to such a degree that they tended toward a kind of synthesis, as evident, for example, in neo-Confucianism. Out of this came a cosmology and a few of the fundamental principles on which painting was to be based from that time forward.

Though at the beginning the style of the northern school was quickly carried to its limits by artists like Fan K'uan or Kuo Hsi, the influence of the masters of the southern school soon came to impose itself on the minds of Sung painters. Mi Fu (1051–1107), who was equally famous as a calligrapher and a collector of art, and his son Mi Yu-jen (1086–1165) are especially notable for their singular

contributions to the richness of Chinese art. They introduced the techniques of *superimposed spots* and *dissolving points*. Their paintings use the dynamic of emptiness with rare genius.

The lively activity that developed under the Northern Sung was not interrupted by the Chin invasion. Indeed, a new institution made possible the preservation and continuity of artistic expression amid the turmoil. The creation of this institution—the Academy of Painting—took place at the very beginning of the Sung period. Recruitment was carried out through competitions. During the Northern Sung, the academy had about sixty members, and under the emperors of the Southern Sung, it had more than a hundred.

In the North, the academy of Hsüan-ho was the most famous. Its hour of glory coincided with the reign of Emperor Hui-tsung, who was himself an exceptional artist. Unfortunately, Hui-tsung led the empire to destruction by abandoning the reins of state to devote himself exclusively to art. In the South, the most famous academy was that of Shao-hsing, under the reign of Emperor Kao-tsung.

The main merit of the academy was the protection of artistic creativity, which until then had been greatly threatened by the tribulations of history. It gave painters the opportunity to deepen at their leisure the techniques handed down to them by the ancients and to broaden the thematic field of artistic inspiration. The most varied categories of specialization were proposed, each relating to a clearly demarcated subject: the human figure, palaces and buildings, foreign tribes, dragons and fish, mountains and waters, domestic and wild animals, flowers and birds, bamboos and pines, vegetables and fruits, and others. Another innovation of the academy was the recruitment of

artists from the whole of China, which permitted an interaction that enriched the work of all concerned.

Among the many academic painters of the Northern Sung were such notables as Chao Po-chü, Kuo Hsi, Huang Chü-ts'ai, Wang Ning, Kao Wen-chin, Yen Wen-kui, Kao K'e-ming, Ts'ui Po, Ma Pen, and Ch'en Yao-ch'en. When the academy moved to the south in the wake of the Chin invasion, a large company of painters of great merit emigrated with it, including Li Ti, Hsiao Chao, Li T'ang, Li Tuan, and Su Han-ch'en.

Li T'ang (1050–1131) was the indispensable bridge linking the two periods. Known for both the power of his art and his incomparable technical mastery, he was a strong and lasting influence on the style of the Southern Sung. His brushstroke technique was called *the big-axe style,* derived as it was from the little-hatchet style invented by Li Szu-hsün during the T'ang period. His style was in turn adopted by the two greatest painters of the end of the Sung period: Ma Yuan (fl. 1172–1214) and Hsia Kuei (fl. 1190–1225).

Though they came late, Ma Yuan and Hsia Kuei radically revived the painting of the period. They excelled at creating an atmosphere of mystical romanticism into whose midst they introduced shapes painted with broad, rigid, and angular strokes that had a singular power of presence. But most important, by taking to the limit the efforts of certain southern painters to distance themselves from the extremely orderly composition of their predecessors, Ma and Hsia invented a kind of decentered perspective. By emphasizing a corner of the landscape, they drew the imaginary gaze of the onlooker toward something indefinite and nostalgic, which although apparently invisible, henceforth became the real subject of the work. It might be that this "eccentricism" is also connected with the

painters' geographical situation. China had lost a great part of its territory, and the painters, like all Chinese of the time, must have felt deeply the drama of being cut off forever from the dreamed-of unity of their country. Be that as it may, their peculiar style of composition earned the two artists the nicknames Ma the Corner and Hsia the Half.

But the accomplishments of these two figures should not cause us to overlook the other outstanding painters of the academy under the Southern Sung: Liu Sung-nien, the brothers Yen Ts'eu-p'ing and Yen Ts'eu-yü, Ma Lin (who was the son of Ma Yuan), Li Sung, Liang K'ai, Chu Huai-ching—to say nothing of the many anonymous painters who also left us works of high quality.

The painting of the academy was not uniform. Within it, the three tendencies that had influenced the direction of Chinese painting from the time of the T'ang continued to coexist. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the style of the academy is characterized by conformity, technical rigor, and specialization in the various genres. But the painting of the academy was not the only painting of the Sung period. There was, in fact, an extremely fertile dialectical relationship between the painters of the academy and those who made a point of distinguishing themselves from it. Among the great painters of the Northern Sung mentioned above, Fan K'uan and Mi Fu worked outside the academy. This permitted them to explore their art in an entirely personal way, with brilliant results. Another important painter outside the academy was the renowned painter of human figures and horses Li Kung (1040–1106).

On the fringes of the academy arose a tradition of painting by scholars who were not painters, a development that was to have decisive consequences. These artists, who were in general excellent calligraphers, had considerable apti-

tude for certain types of painting, particularly for subjects falling under the heading "plants and flowers," since this kind of painting requires a brushstroke technique that is often close to the type used in writing. The primary aim of these scholar-painters was not to create great art but to express through forms borrowed from nature a disposition of the spirit and, ultimately, a way of being. The first and most illustrious of these painters, Su Tung-po (1036–1101), said: "My bamboo branches do not have sections—what is strange about that? This is bamboo that was born in my heart and not bamboo you can merely look at from the outside with your eyes." In connection with a picture by his friend Wen T'ung, another great painter of bamboo, Su Tung-po made the famous remark: "Before you can paint bamboo, it must first grow in your inmost heart."

Along with several others, including Huang T'ing-chien and Mi Fu, Su Tung-po established the practice, unique to Chinese painting, of inscribing poetry in the blank space of a picture. The original purpose of this was to transform painting into an art that was somehow more complete, combining the plastic quality of the image with the musical quality of the verses, and on a more profound level, combining the dimension of space with the dimension of time.

The painting style of the scholars was preserved in its essential form under the Southern Sung emperors by Cheng Sseu-hsiao, Chao Meng-chien, and Yang Wu-chiu, who specialized in painting orchids, narcissus, and plum branches, respectively. It was not, however, until the next dynasty that this particular form of art became a dominant trend.

The Yüan Period (1271–1368)

The Sung dynasty collapsed under the onslaught of the Mongols, who founded a new dynasty in China, the Yüan, which lasted about a century. The new masters of the country exercised ruthless suppression and imposed severe censorship on the populace, particularly on the class of scholars. One might well suppose that artistic creation would have gone into decline as a result of this rigorous censorship, but this was not the case. Along with popular theater, painting became the primary form of expression of this period. Because it did not treat subjects directly connected with political realities, painting was not an admissible target for the criticism of the censors. More important, most painters worked outside of the official circles, some of them even choosing a hermit's life.

The most famous of these painters were the Four Great Masters of the Yüan: Huang Kung-wang (1269–1354), Wu Chen (1280–1354), Ni Tsan (1301–1374), and Wang Meng (1308–1385). All four belonged to the second generation of Yüan painters and lived mostly in the southern provinces of Chang-su and Che-chiang. They knew each other socially and even collaborated on occasion. Nonetheless, their styles were so different that it is nearly impossible to confuse them. Huang Kung-wang's work is earmarked by his authoritative and balanced vision, a reflection of his personality. His celebrated painting *My Stay at Mount Fu-ch'un* is filled with luminous serenity and is without doubt the best illustration of the character of his art. Wu Chen was shy by nature, generally preferring the company of monks. His simple life-style is evident in his painting, which is strikingly direct and abrupt, while also tinged with a sense of purity. Ni Tsan was a Taoist adept (as was Huang Kung-wang). In his work, he seems to seek out a bare quality, which he conveys by using forms purified to the extreme and rendered with intentionally "insipid" brushstrokes to depict the elements of nature. Wang Meng enriched the painting of the time with his

extraordinarily powerful work. Using a brushstroke of his own invention—the sinuous yet dense *ox-hair stroke,*—he created dynamic landscapes that seem constantly to quiver, recalling the work of Van Gogh in his last years.

Despite their differences in style, these four painters had in common many significant features. All were accomplished scholars—that is, they were at once painters, calligraphers, and poets—and their paintings are adorned by numerous poems. They thus contributed to the definitive establishment of the tradition of scholarly painting inaugurated under the Sung by Su Tung-po, Wen T'ung, Mi Fu, and others. But it was on the technical level that they made their most valuable contribution. They repudiated the heritage of the southern painters of the Sung period, which was all too close to their own approach, and tried to go back instead to the art of the masters of the Five Dynasties period (Tung Yuan, Chü Jan) and the masters of the Northern Sung (Fan K'uan, Kuo Hsi, Mi Fu), while at the same time adding something more spontaneous and free, especially in their way of moving the brush and working the ink. They opened up new possibilities for these two inseparable elements of Chinese pictorial art, working to bring out both flavor and resonance. They took advantage of the least brushstroke or the smallest spot of ink, diluted or concentrated, to produce a perceivable imprint of the very vibration of their souls. A picture painted in this way is not to be appreciated for its general impact alone but must be savored in its most minute details.

It can be said that the work of these four painters represents the sum of the art of the Yüan period. But they could not have attained the mastery they did had it not been for the bold pioneers who blazed the way for them. Foremost among these was the incomparable Chao Meng-fu (1254–1322), who studied with the great realist painter Ch'ien

Hsüan (ca. 1235–1301), known for his minutely detailed and precise style. Chao was extremely gifted and excelled in all genres. Since he also occupied a high rank in the government of the Mongols, he set the tone for the period. He was an exceptional calligrapher and was able to bring into his painting a subtle brush play from which the Four Masters fully profited. Kao K'e-kung, a great landscape painter of classical technique and completely personal vision, contributed equally to Chao in assuring the transmission of the art of Sung painting to the painters of the Yüan period. Other painters worthy of mention are T'ang Li, T'ao Chih-po, Fang Ts'ung-i, and Sheng Mou. Each of these successfully expressed in his own way the same spirit of expansiveness and freedom.

The Ming Period (1368–1644)

The Mongol order was overthrown in the uprising of 1368. The leader of the rebellion, Chu Yuan-chang, founded a new dynasty, the Ming, in which power was highly centralized and autocratic. The academy, which had been suppressed by the Yüan, was soon restored by the state, though in a somewhat different form. But because of the strict control of the government over all possible forms of creation, and in spite of the presence of numerous artists of real talent, painting was never able to regain the multifaceted dynamism that was the glory of the Sung academy. The inability to arouse a sense of openness in artistic creation helped lead Chinese pictorial art toward the often disappointing academicism that began to appear at the end of the Ming period.

But the period is far from negligible. It created favorable conditions for the development of certain talents of the

first rank. These painters, though they did not distinguish themselves through the invention of new forms, did not fail to augment the greatness of the heritage left to them by the ancients.

In the southern maritime provinces of Chiang-su and Che-chiang, which were at this time opening to the world outside, unprecedented economic expansion was under way. All through the Ming period, these two regions were to be the centers of intense cultural activity. It was not long before two schools of painting were confronting one another: the school of Che in Che-chiang and the school of Wu in Chiang-su. The school of Wu came later than the school of Che and made efforts to distinguish itself from the latter. This twofold relationship of succession and rivalry is important for having kept the field of research open for more than half a century.

Tai Chin emerged in the first half of the fifteenth century as the uncontested head of the school of Che, but not because he sought this distinction. A highly respected court painter, he retired to Hangchow, the region of his birth, in the wake of intrigues that had turned against him. He continued to paint during his period of retreat but died poor and unknown. Clearly influenced by the destiny that had made him familiar with two such opposite worlds, his painting also follows two very different styles. One is academic, derivative of the work of Ma Yuan and Hsia Kuei of the Southern Sung; the other is more personal, showing an affinity with the work of Wu Chen, one of the Four Masters of the Yüan period. Tai Chin was outstanding in both these styles and left behind works of a quality so rare that they were soon held up by his successors as exemplary models of a new approach. Following in his footsteps, Wu Wei (1459–1508), a compatriot who was also part of the academy, completed the work of establishing the reputation of the school of Che by presenting his admiring contemporaries with a very forceful artistic opus, which in its own way brought together the qualities of academic rigor and personal inspiration. These two *chefs d'école* were to have numerous imitators, of whom the best known was Lan Ying (1585–1657).

Toward the end of the fifteenth century, in the region of the city of Suchow in Chiang-su Province, a particularly prosperous commercial and cultural center, another school came into being, elevated to excellence by painters from scholarly families. Reacting against the school of Che, this school of Wu aimed to reconnect with the *literary* painting of the Yüan period. Two painters immediately assured the reputation of the school of Wu: Shen Chou (1427–1509) and his disciple Wen Cheng–ming (1470–1559). Since both lived to an advanced age, their names dominated the art world for several decades. Their works are pervaded by a sense of balance and harmony and faithfully follow completely rigid ethical and aesthetic principles. Nonetheless, they are sometimes shot through with abrupt signs of violence. This reflects the image of a society that has attained an extreme degree of refinement but secretly realizes that it is threatened from within and from without by forces of dissolution, a society that uneasily prods itself with questions about its own fate. Two other great painters, Lu Chih (1496–1576) and Ch'en Shun (1483–1544), succeeded Shen Chou and Wen Cheng-ming and followed the same path. Ch'en Shun is especially noteworthy, for through an astonishing mastery of the use of ink that recalls the art of Mi Fu of the Sung period, he brought a salutary freshness to the artistic production of the period.

On the fringes of these two schools, a third tendency brought together painters who were described as being academic in style. (It should be noted that in China this

qualification always refers to the style of the Sung academy.) Three names dominate this trend: Chou Ch'en (fl. ca. early sixteenth century) and his two disciples T'ang Yin (1470–1523) and Ch'iu Ying (ca. 1510–1551). Though none of the three belonged to the academy, each of them made an effort to reconnect with the style of the T'ang and Sung periods. In contrast to the scholars of the Wu school, painters of this school were often of modest origins. Ch'iu Ying was a simple artisan. T'ang Yin's precocious intelligence enabled him to pursue his studies and gain admittance to cultivated circles, but following an offense during an examination, he once again found himself excluded from them. He then abandoned himself to a life of dissipation, which provided a constant supply of grist to the gossip mills of the period.

Since they could not pretend to match the culture of their rivals, these artists sought to distinguish themselves through the virtuousity of their technique; through the expertly harmonious, deliberate, and balanced composition of their works; and through the quality of their execution, in which each detail was carried to the ultimate level of refinement. Eclectic in their choices of subject matter, they left behind authentic masterpieces in the most diverse categories: realistic or imaginary landscapes, scenes of life at the ancient courts, portraits of courtesans, mythical tales, trees and flowers, and more.

The period was next dominated by the prodigious figure of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555–1636). A product of the school of Wu, he was an artist of great talent and formalist spirit. He occupied a high official post and took pleasure in theoretical discussions. Through his ideas of schematization, he contributed considerably to orienting the painting of his time toward a formal academicism, in which everything was worked out in terms of formulas and rules.

Fortunately, the uniformity preached by Tung was violated by the original creations of a number of marginal artists, such as Hsu Wei (1521–1593) and Ch'en Hung-shou (1599–1652), both of whom influenced the painting of the following dynasty. Hsu Wei was one of the rare Chinese artists to be certified as mad. Extremely gifted, yet with a naked and raw sensibility, he lost his mental balance around the age of forty after several cruel bereavements and a series of failures in the official examinations. He continued to paint, however, and to do calligraphy during the many years that remained of his life, creating works of a definite expressionistic character that radiate extraordinary power. Ch'en Hung-shou was known especially as a painter of human subjects and deliberately cultivated the strange and the ridiculous. Putting his perfect technical mastery (which links him with the best portrait artists of the T'ang and Sung) at the service of an entirely personal style, he did not hesitate to distort forms in order to accentuate their expressiveness. He sought to express through his human subjects not a kind of resemblance based on a combination of precise details but a way of being that called out for nothing less than freedom.

The Ch'ing Period (1644–1912)

The academicism in which so many Ming painters were embedded might well have delivered a fatal blow to the adventure of Chinese painting, were it not for the flowering during the same period of a number of independent geniuses. They paved the way for an entire lineage of amazing painters, untamed individualists who were to adorn the final Chinese dynasty with unexpected brilliance. They were confirmed expressionists (most of them

were in open revolt against the new regime), who sometimes pushed originally to the point of extravagance and were able to express themselves with a note of genius. Thanks to them, the painting of the Ch'ing period was far from being a pale continuation of that of the Ming. It appears to our eyes today as the last high-cresting wave of a tradition that was already more than a thousand years old.

The Ch'ing dynasty began with the elevation to the throne of a Manchu emperor in 1644. Just as the Mongols did when they came into power, the Manchus began by imposing pitiless censorship in all areas where their authority could freely penetrate. As we know, pictorial art was relatively sheltered from the effects of this kind of minutely fastidious despotism. But whereas artists of the Yüan period avoided subjects connected with the political, social, or moral situation of the country, Ch'ing artists found ingenious ways to express their resolutely uncompromising attitude, even defiance. They did this under the cover of transparent symbolism and the oblique innuendos of the poetry inscribed on the edges of their pictures.

The earliest among them had lived through the drama of the fall of the Ming dynasty. Their attitude toward the new order of things was one of rejection or, at least, withdrawal. We therefore should not be surprised that the four representatives par excellence of this new wave of artists, known as the Four Eminent Monk-Painters, all chose to lead solitary lives. The four were Hung Jen (1610–1663), K'un Ts'an (1612–1693), Chu Ta (1626–1705), and Shih-t'ao (1641–after 1710).

Hung Jen came from An-hui. After living a vagabond life in various provinces, he settled in a monastery at the foot of Mount Huang-shan in the province of his birth. With Shih-t'ao and Mei Ch'ing, he contributed to the fame

of the Huang-shan school. Though he took as models the great masters of the Yüan period, he successfully developed his own very personal style, especially in his depiction of rocks. His style shows his concern with rediscovering the irreducible forms in nature while at the same time affirming its uncompromisingly holistic character.

K'un Ts'an became involved in the war of resistance against the Manchus at the age of thirty. Ten years later, under the new regime, he became a monk. From that point on, we find him in various monasteries in southern China. His landscapes, recalling those of Wang Meng of the Yüan period, strike us with their quivering appearance and their pathos.

Chu Ta was without doubt the most haughty and extravagant of the four. To avoid having to reach any reconciliation with the new regime, he went so far as to masquerade as a mute or a madman. His pictures, fraught with jagged rocks and knotted roots, are violent in their workmanship and frighteningly bizarre. When depicting eagles, owls, fish, rats, or other animals, he gives them a strange bearing, sometimes a kind of casual offhandedness, sometimes outright aggression. His unique style, which proceeds by a succession of explosive brushstrokes, makes him one of the most original and most inimitable painters in the history of Chinese painting.

The gifted Shih-t'ao was a complex personality. His tragic childhood was marked by a painful quest for identity, while those around him were seeking to deprive him of one. His father, who was of the royal line of the Ming, was assassinated after the death of the last Ming emperor by members of his own family who were involved in a struggle for power. Shih-t'ao, then three years old, only escaped with his life through the vigilance of a servant, who confided him to the care of a monastery. The bril-

liance of his talent and his rapid success soon led him to commit his allegiance to the new masters. He was attracted to the world and had great difficulty complying with the monastic rule he had chosen. His was a paradoxical spirit, perpetually torn between contrary forces. This was revealed in his work, which was varied, fertile, and marked by incessant self-questioning. This is also the way we see him in his *Remarks on Painting,* one of the most important theoretical texts in the history of Chinese painting.

An uncategorizable painter, who was a contemporary of the Four Eminent Monk-Painters, Kung Hsien (1599–1689) was a strong personality who left his mark on the painting of the time. The greater part of his life was spent in the region of Nanking, where he participated actively in the patriotic movement against the Manchus. Once the new regime was in place, he withdrew to the solitude of Mount Ch'ing-liang. He divided his time there between painting and teaching, but he did not entirely give up taking a hand in the affairs of the world. His landscapes are heavily charged with thick ink, as though menaced by an apparently imminent storm. They reflect his character, at once ardent and shadowy, which pushed him throughout his life to espouse all the just causes he encountered.

The attitude of these "elders" did not fail to have certain repercussions on the attitude of their direct successors, the most famous of whom are known collectively as the Eight Eccentrics of Yangchow: Cheng Hsieh (1693–1765), Chin Nung (1687–1763), Luo Pin (1733–1799), Li Fang-ying (1695–1755), Wang Shih-shen (1686–1759), Kao Hsiang (1688–1753), Huang Shen (1687–1766), and Li Shan (1692–1762). Each in his own way exalted the expressionist technique, which was henceforth to be in favor, by pushing it, if possible, to greater levels of offhandedness and nonconformity.

Standing out among this group is Cheng Hsieh, who was one of the last examples of an accomplished scholar, in the best sense of the term. A man of both thought and action, after successfully passing the official examinations, he assiduously exercised the functions of provincial prefect while also expressing in his letters and poems social and political ideas based on a generous but exacting humanism. He was by turns actively engaged (deliberately passing judgment against the rich in spite of unjust laws and courageously looking after the interests of the victimized common people) and withdrawn (giving himself over to his painting and calligraphy with an exemplary freedom of spirit). He was thus able to contribute equally through his acute critical sense and through a temperament naturally given to extravagance and to defiance of all convention. His work reminds us that at every stage in the history of Chinese painting, a current of thought manifests that refuses to consider art as a flight from reality or as the product of purely aesthetic concerns and that prefers to see the artist's act of creation as a concrete form of human accomplishment.

The expressionist current that so characterized the art of the Ch'ing period was to be exemplified throughout the nineteenth century by artists of great talent, such as Jen Po-nien (1839–1895), Wu Ch'ang-shih (1844–1927), and Ch'i Pai-shih (1863–1957).

Another current of the same period was dedicated to patient defense of the tradition inherited from the ancients. This current had its hour of glory in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Artists of this approach, such as Yun Shou-p'ing (1633–1690) and Wu Li (1632–1717), were thoroughly versed in all the refinements of traditional technique. They were the embodiment of orthodoxy and enjoyed considerable prestige. In point of fact, their merit

is considerable. Painters of today owe them gratitude for preserving intact some of the major accomplishments of the past. Moreover, some of these artists did not confine themselves to playing this role of preserver. When necessary, they did not hesitate to innovate in the subtle art of composition.

Chinese painting has a historical tradition of relating the deeds and acts of the great painters in order to illustrate their particular styles. Some of the legends border on the fantastic, underlining the sacred or magical role that the Chinese attribute to painting. I shall cite a few from among the most famous of these.[3] This can help us both to familiarize ourselves with some of the great painters and to penetrate into the secrets of the Chinese pictorial art.

> Chuang-tzu, the great Taoist philosopher of the second century BCE, tells of Prince Yuan of the Sung dynasty, who indicated his desire to have a beautiful picture. Many painters presented themselves, and after receiving instructions, they all bowed respectfully and remained on the spot, licking their brushes and grinding their ink. There were so many artists that half of them had to stay outside. One painter arrived after the appointed time, unhurried and completely at ease. Having received the instructions and bowed, he did not stay, but withdrew to his house. The prince sent someone to see what he was doing. Before beginning work, he had taken off his jacket and, nude to the waist, had settled down in cross-legged posture. "There's a real painter," said the prince, "That's the one I've got to have."
>
> Chang Seng-yu, of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, was painting four giant dragons on the walls of the An-luo Temple of Nanking. The dragons had no eyes. To those who asked the reason for this, the painter replied, "If I gave these dragons eyes, they would fly away." The people, not believing him, accused him of fraud. At their insistence, the painter consented to give a demonstration. Hardly had he finished painting in the eyes on two of the dragons when a deafening thunderclap was heard. The walls cracked, allowing the two dragons to escape in a rush of flight. When calm returned, it was observed that nothing remained on the walls but the two dragons without eyes.
>
> Ku K'ai-chih, the celebrated painter of the Chin dynasty, fell in love with a girl from the neighboring house. The girl refused his advances. Out of spite, Ku painted the girl on the wall of his room and planted a needle in the place where the heart was. The girl fell sick, the victim of a strange pain in her heart. She was not healed until the painter, yielding to her supplications, pulled the needle out.
>
> Chang Hsiao-shih, of the T'ang period, came back to life after having tasted death. From that time on, he excelled in depicting scenes of hell. It was said that what he painted did not spring from his imagination at all; it was actual eyewitness work.
>
> During the era of K'ai-yuan in the T'ang dynasty, General P'ei, who had just lost his mother, asked the great painter Wu Tao-tzu to paint some figures of gods at T'ien-ching Temple to protect the soul of the deceased. Wu asked the general to give a vivid demonstration embodying the image of the power of the gods face-to-face with the demons. Removing his mourning garb and donning his battle dress, the general mounted his horse and executed a sword dance at a gallop. His superb carriage and his lightninglike gestures stupefied the thousands of people who had come to witness the scene. Inspired and exalted, the painter removed his clothes and began to paint, irresistably attracted, as if in a

trance. The air vibrated in sympathy with his brushstrokes. . . . When the moment came to add the halo above the head of each god, the painter, with a single movement, drew a perfect circle. The crowd, overcome, burst into cries of admiration.

Emperor Hsüan-tsung was nostalgic for the valley of the Chia-ling River. He sent to the region the great realist landscape painter Li Ssu-hsün and Wu Tao-tzu. On their return, they were to reproduce scenes from the area on the walls of the emperor's Ta-t'ung Palace. Li returned, loaded with documents and sketches, and spent several months executing his picture. As for Wu, he returned empty-handed. To the emperor's astonishment, Wu replied, "It's all there, in my heart." Setting to work, in a few days he created a masterpiece.

Li Ssu-hsün was also given the task of painting the folding screens of the palace. He depicted on them scenes of mountains and waters that earned the admiration of all. However, one day the emperor complained to the painter, "The waterfalls you have painted are too noisy; they are keeping me from sleeping."

Lu Leng-chia studied painting with Wu Tao-tzu, but he despaired of ever being able to possess the art of his master. Commissioned to execute the frescoes in Chuang-yen Temple, Lu attempted to equal the excellence of the frescoes that Wu had done in Tsung-chih Temple. One day, Wu came by chance into Chuang-yen Temple and saw the frescoes by his former disciple. He burst into cries of admiration mixed with fright: "This painter was very much my inferior; in these frescoes, he has become my equal. But he has entirely exhausted his creative force in them!" Indeed, Lu died shortly thereafter.

Just as his contemporary the poet Li Po had drowned in a river trying to catch hold of the reflection of the moon,

about whose beauty he had so often sung, legend recounts that Wu Tao-tzu disappeared into the mist of a landscape he had just painted.

Han Kan, the celebrated T'ang painter of horses, received a visit one evening from a man dressed in red. The man said: "I am here on behalf of the spirits. You are requested to paint an excellent courser that they will be needing." Han Kan obeyed. He made a sketch of a fantastic horse and then painted a picture based on it on a large sheet of paper. He burned the painting and gave the ashes to the messenger, who then disappeared. Some years later, Han ran into a veterinarian friend of his, who told him about having taken care of a strange horse. When he saw the horse, Han exclaimed, "But that's the one I painted!" An instant later, the horse crumpled to the ground, as though fainting. The veterinarian then discovered a defect in the formation of one of the horse's legs. Troubled, Han returned home. He got out the old sketch and was stupefied to see that in painting the horse's right leg his brush had slipped.

Mi Fu, of the Sung period, was at Wu-wei when he one day saw a giant rock of extravagant ugliness. Overcome by emotion, he put on his ceremonial garb and prostrated to the rock, calling it his dear older brother.

In his *T'u hua-chien-wen-chih,* Kuo Ssu described his father Kuo Hsi's way of painting: "When he was about to paint, he sat down near a bright window. I would put his table in order, light some incense, and carefully arrange his ink and brushes in front of him. After that, he washed his hands as though he were about to receive a distinguished guest. He remained silent for a long time in order to calm his mind and collect his thoughts. Only when he was in possession of a precise vision would he begin to paint. He often spoke of his persistent fear of

> finding himself in front of his own work with a distracted mind."

> Wang Mo, the vagabond painter of the T'ang period, was known for his bouts of drunkenness. He drank abundantly before undertaking a painting. Once drunk, he set to painting in the *splattered ink* style. Laughing and singing, he would gesture with both his hands and feet. He would even sometimes dip his long hair in the ink and use it for a brush. Under his magical brush, mountains, trees, rocks, clouds, and other shapes would appear as if by enchantment, some of them brilliant, some of them ethereal. They seemed to be direct emanations of creation itself. The finished picture was always so perfectly true that one had the impression that there was not a single trace of ink there. When he died, Wang Mo's coffin was as light as if it were empty. It is said that his body had been transformed into a cloud.

I shall conclude this section by recalling the great painter-poet Wang Wei, who introduced monochrome painting and was the founder of the southern school. Though his poetry is well known, not one of his pictures has come down to us. Precisely because of this absence, his successors attempted to re-create Wang Wei's evocatively titled pictures. Because he wrote, and because others imagined his painting, Wang created a dream space, the very type of space toward which Chinese painting reaches.

The following is the complete text of a letter that Wang wrote from his retreat to his poet friend Pei Ti, a letter that clearly reflects a sensibility infused with simplicity, sympathy, and interior vision.

> At the end of this twelfth month, the weather remains clear and pleasant. I wanted to signal you to come over to my mountain, but knowing you to be deeply im-

> mersed in the classics, I restrained myself. Then I headed for the hills and went to the Temple of Mercy. After a frugal meal with the monks, I again departed. North of Black Spring, which I crossed, the rising moon lit up the entire countryside. I climbed up Hua-tzu Hill, from where I could see the waters of Wang-ch'uan River moving in waves under the moonlight. A few distant fires shone like sparks through the trees of the forest. Nearer by, at the end of the village lanes, the barking of dogs resounded like a leopard's cries. The noise of the villagers grinding their rice alternated with the sound of bells. By my side, the young servant remains silent. Sitting by myself, I let myself be overcome by the memory of those delicious moments when we walked together hand in hand on the paths along the river composing poems. If only the spring would come, bringing the trees and plants on the mountainside to blossom! The graceful fish wriggle in the water, and the gulls fly off with a rapid beating of wings. The pheasants sing at dawn at the edge of the fields, whose grass still glistens with dew. Ah, the time will not be long. You will come enjoy this countryside with me, won't you? You, with a spirit so elevated and subtle—you will grasp its mysterious beauty. If that were not true, I would not have dared to annoy you with such a futile invitation. I'm taking advantage of the passing by of a porter of medicinal plants to get this message to you.
>
> The mountain hermit,
>
> Wang Wei

Part One

CHINESE PAINTING AND THE NOTION OF EMPTINESS

Introduction: Historical Background

In attempting to sort out the elements of a Chinese semiology, one repeatedly encounters a notion that is central but often neglected—neglected, perhaps, because it is central. The notion of emptiness is no less essential in the system of Chinese thought than the complementary ideas of yin and yang. Emptiness emerges as pivotal to the way the Chinese conceive the universe. In addition to its philosophical and religious content, emptiness governs the mechanism of a whole group of disciplines of meaning (painting, poetry, music, theater) and that of another group of disciplines connected with the physiological domain (representation of the human body, the gymnastic practice of t'ai chi ch'uan, acupuncture, and so forth). Emptiness also plays a fundamental role in military science, the martial arts, and in the art of cooking.

In the Chinese perspective, emptiness is not, as one might suppose, something vague or nonexistent. It is dynamic and active. Linked with the idea of vital breaths and with the principle of the alternation of yin and yang, it is the preeminent site of transformation, the place where *fullness* can attain its whole measure. Emptiness introduces discontinuity and reversibility into a given system and thus permits the elements composing the system to transcend rigid opposition and one-sided development. At the same time, emptiness offers human beings the possibility of approaching the universe at the level of totality.

Though it is essential in Chinese thought, the notion of emptiness has never been systematically studied in its application to the practical disciplines. There are without doubt numerous texts in which emptiness is often mentioned, but it is presented as a natural entity without need of definition. The result is that its status and its function remain extremely ill defined. In spite of this lacuna, there exists an actual implicit tradition to which everyone refers.

In the realm of art, a Chinese person, whether an artist or merely an amateur, intuitively accepts emptiness as a basic principle, even in the absence of profound knowledge. Let us take, for example, primary forms such as music, poetry, and painting. Without going into details, we can say that in musical interpretations, emptiness is rendered not only by certain syncopated rhythms but above all by silence. This silence is not a mechanically calculated quantity. Breaking up continuous development, it creates a space that enables the sounds to transcend themselves and accede to a kind of resonance beyond the resonances.[4]

In poetry, emptiness is introduced by suppressing certain words with purely grammatical functions (which are in fact called *empty words*) and by the use in the middle of a poem of an original form known as *parallelism*.[5] Through the discontinuity and reversibility they effect within the linear and temporal progression of language, these techniques reveal the desire of the poet to create a relationship of open reciprocity between the subject and the objective world, thus transforming lived time into living space. (I shall elucidate this point in chapter 1.)

It is, however, in painting that emptiness is manifested in the most visible and complete way. In certain pictures of the Sung and Yüan periods, we observe that emptiness (the unpainted area) may occupy as much as two-thirds of the canvas. Confronted by pictures like this, even an innocent onlooker vaguely feels that emptiness is a presence that is not inert, a presence that is pervaded by breaths that connect the visible world to an invisible one. Even within the visible world (the painted area), emptiness, represented by clouds, circulates between mountains and waters, which constitute its two poles. The cloud, born from the condensation of water but also taking on the forms of the mountain, is an intermediary form between the two apparently antinomic poles, drawing the two, mountain ⇄ water, into a process of reciprocal becoming.

In the Chinese perspective, without emptiness between them, mountain and water would stand in a relationship of rigid opposition and thus be static. Each would oppose the other and through this opposition be confirmed in its definite status. With emptiness as intermediary, the painter creates the impression that the mountain could virtually enter the emptiness and melt down into waves, and that inversely, the water, by way of the emptiness, could rise up into a mountain. As a result, mountain and water are no longer perceived as partial elements opposed and frozen but as embodiments of the dynamic law of the real. Because of the disruption of the linear perspective by empti-

ness within the pictorial realm, we once again note this relationship of reciprocal becoming between humans and nature within the picture, on one hand, and between the onlooker and the picture as a whole, on the other.

The examples provided by music, poetry, and especially painting show the active function of emptiness. Far from being a kind of no-man's-land that would imply neutralization or compromise, emptiness makes possible the process of interiorization and transformation through which each thing actualizes its sameness and otherness and, in so doing, attains totality. In this sense, Chinese painting is a philosophy in action. It is seen as a sacred discipline, because its aim is nothing less than the total fulfillment of the human being, including his or her most unconscious aspect.

In his celebrated *Li-tai ming-hua chi,* Chang Yen-yuan says: "Painting perfects culture, governs human relations, and explores the mystery of the universe. Its value is equal to that of the six classics. Like the rotation of the seasons, it regulates the rhythm of nature and of man." It is for this reason that I have chosen painting as the realm of application in which to study emptiness. It is true that the dichotomy of emptiness and fullness is a notion that is also common in the Western pictorial and plastic arts. However, in what follows, I shall stress the specifically Chinese understanding of emptiness.

Before looking into emptiness in painting, we should first examine its philosophical underpinnings. But I want to emphasize the semiotic rather than the purely philosophical nature of this study. This means, first, that emptiness will be conceived more as a sign than as a concept. It is a privileged sign, because it is precisely that through which the other elements in a given system define themselves as signs. This necessitates that we focus primarily on the functional role of emptiness.

The semiotic approach also means that my analysis will be based on the principal extant texts. For each assertion made, I shall make numerous textual citations. But the point of view of a semiologist has to be different from that of an exegete or a philologist. The philosophy that a painting undertakes to manifest and the painting itself as a discipline of meaning have created each other in a cultural context charged with implicit, even unconscious, intentions. The work of a semiologist is to go beyond the explicit tradition, while avoiding the pitfall of extrapolation. The authenticity of such a labor is guaranteed by an internal analysis, rigorously carried to the limit, that elicits constituent elements and distinguishes levels of observation. Only when this has been done does it become possible to grasp relevant characteristics as well as real codes of functioning.

Such a semiotic study, it may be hoped, will be of more than merely academic interest. It should serve to bring out the essential and permanent basic qualities of a culture. At the outset, emptiness was a part of an overall conception that attempted to provide a spiritual and rational explanation of the universe. Later on, in spite of the changes that took place in the overall conception, emptiness remained a primordial element in the Chinese manner of apprehending the objective world. Having become a key for practical life, what emptiness offered was no longer so much an explanation (even though it was born from a fundamental intuition and tried and tested by more than a thousand years of experience) but an understanding, a piece of wisdom propounding a certain art of life. Emptiness, in correlation with such other notions as vital breaths and yin-yang, is without doubt the most original and the most

constant affirmation of a dynamic and holistic vision of life that ever came out of China. In China, it continues to govern the realm of art and such vital disciplines as acupuncture and t'ai chi ch'uan.

1 *Emptiness in Chinese Philosophy*

THE IDEA OF EMPTINESS HAS existed from the beginnings of Chinese thought. It is found in the seminal *Book of Changes (I ching)*. This work was formative to the principal schools of thought that came into being during the Warring Kingdoms period (403–222 BCE), which situated themselves in relation to the *Book of Changes* or were subject to its influence.

It was, however, the philosophers of the Taoist school who made emptiness the central element of their systems. The essence of Taoism was formulated by the two founders of the school, Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu (the latter lived toward the end of the fourth century BCE). During the Han dynasty, the group of scholars known as Huai-nan-tzu contributed powerfully toward the development of certain aspects of Taoist thought. Most later critics of art referred

primarily to the works of these three in elaborating their aesthetic theories. The tradition of a philosophy of art began during the Six Dynasties period (220–589 CE), at the very time when the neo-Taoist current was dominant. The advocates of this school—such as Wang Pi, Hsiang Hsiu, Kuo Hsiang, and Lie-tzu (whose works were collected at this time)—renewed Taoist thought precisely by emphasizing the notion of emptiness.

Emptiness was not, however, the exclusive preserve of the Taoists. Other philosophers integrated it into their systems, according it greater or lesser importance. We find developments of the idea in the works of Hsün-tzu and Kuan-tzu (a thinker of the Confucian and Legalist schools), both contemporaries of Chuang-tzu.[6] Later on, emptiness would become a major theme of the great masters of Ch'an Buddhism during the T'ang period. It was taken up again in the Sung period in the neo-Confucian cosmology.

Since the purpose here is not to study the evolution of the philosophy of emptiness but to reveal the notion's philosophical underpinnings as they apply to certain practical domains, I shall focus only on the texts of Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, and to some extent, Huai-nan-tzu. There is nothing essential that is not included in them, and as I have pointed out, the aesthetic philosophy that developed later was almost exclusively based on them. We will look into the following three points: the way emptiness is conceived; the relationship between emptiness and the yin-yang pair; and the implications of emptiness for the human life.

The Conception of Emptiness

Looking through the texts of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, one cannot fail to note a kind of confusion concerning the

status of emptiness. Emptiness is perceived as belonging to two realms: the noumenal and the phenomenal.[7] It is at one and the same time the supreme state of the origin and the central element in the workings of the world of things. This double nature of emptiness, in the Taoist point of view, does not appear at all ambiguous. Its status as original in some way guarantees the efficacy of its functional role; conversely, its functional role, which governs all things, is an actual indication of the reality of primordial emptiness.

Although these two aspects of emptiness are constantly interacting, for the sake of clarity we shall examine them successively.

EMPTINESS PARTICIPATING IN THE NOUMENAL

Emptiness is the very foundation of the Taoist ontology. That which *is* before heaven-earth is nonbeing, nothing, emptiness. Two terms are used to refer to the idea of emptiness: *wu* and *hsü* (though the Buddhists were later to highlight a third term: *k'ung*). These two, being interconnected, are sometimes confused. Each of the two terms can, however, be defined in terms of the opposite it evokes. Thus *wu*, which has as its corollary *you* (being), is generally translated in the West as "nonbeing" or "nothing"; whereas *hsü*, which has *shih* (fullness) for a corollary, is translated as "emptiness."

For Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, though the origin of the universe is most often designated by *wu*, *hsü* is used in characterizing the original state toward which all existents should strive. Starting with the Sung period, owing in particular to the philosopher Chang Tsai, who established the expression *t'ai-hsü* (supreme emptiness), *hsü* became the established term for emptiness.

LAO-TZU[8]

Being produces the ten thousand existents, but being is produced by nothing *(wu)*. [chap. 40]

CHUANG-TZU

At the origin, there is nothing *(wu)*. Nothing has no name. From nothing the one is born. The one has no form. ["Heaven-Earth"]

LAO-TZU

Arrived at the extreme of emptiness *(hsü)*, firmly anchored in quietude, whereas the ten thousand existents come into being with a single leap, I contemplate their return. [chap. 16]

CHUANG-TZU

Whoever attains to his primeval virtue becomes identified with the origin of the universe and through that with emptiness *(hsü)*. ["Heaven-Earth"]

CHUANG-TZU

The Tao is fastened to its root, which is emptiness. ["Continence of the Heart"]

HUAI-NAN-TZU

The Tao has emptiness as its origin. From emptiness is born the cosmos, from which the vital breaths emanate. ["The Laws of Heaven"]

In the last two quotations, we see that emptiness is linked to the Tao, the Way. It will be useful here to look at that relationship in precise terms. Let us say, simplifying a great deal, that in comparison to emptiness, the Tao has a more general content. Sometimes it represents the Origin, and then it is mixed up with emptiness. Sometimes it is presented as a manifestation of emptiness. Sometimes the Tao, in a broader sense, also encompasses the entirety of the created universe that is immanent within it. In the two passages that follow, Lao-tzu attempts to "describe" the Tao as a manifestation of emptiness.

LAO-TZU

A thing made of a mixture was there before heaven-earth. Silent, oh yes, certainly without limit. Immutable, reposing upon itself, turning flawlessly and without wear. One can see in this the mother of everything under heaven. Its name is not known to us. We call it the Way. [chap. 25]

LAO-TZU

Looking without seeing, we call it invisible; listening without hearing, we call it inaudible; groping without reaching, we call it imperceptible. Here are three inexplicable things that constitute a unity. Its top is not bright, its bottom is not dark. It meanders indefinitely, indistinctly, until it returns to no-thing. . . . It is characterized as the form of that which has no form and the image of that which is not an image. [chap. 14]

Chuang-tzu teaches that the Tao cannot be conceived other than in its relation to emptiness.

CHUANG-TZU

No-Beginning says: "The Tao cannot be heard; that which is heard is not it. The Tao cannot be seen; that which is seen is not it. The Tao cannot be formulated; that which is formulated is not it. That which gives birth to forms is without form. The Tao should not be named." And he added: "Whoever answers someone who questions him about the Tao does not know the Tao. The very fact of asking questions about the Tao shows that one has not yet even heard the Tao spoken about. The truth is that the Tao abides neither questions nor answers to questions. To ask questions about the Tao, which does not admit questions, is to consider it as a finite thing. To give answers about the Tao, which

> does not contain any answers, it is to consider it as a thing devoid of innerness. Whoever gives answers about that which does not have innerness and asks questions about that which is finite does not grasp either the outer universe or its inner origin. He does not cross Mount K'un-lun; he does not go as far as supreme emptiness." ["Intelligence Journeys in the North"]

EMPTINESS PARTICIPATING IN THE PHENOMENAL

Having shown the primacy of emptiness in Taoist ontology, we may now examine the role played by emptiness in the various domains of the material world. The Tao has emptiness as its origin, yet it functions in animating the ten thousand existents only by means of emptiness, from which the primordial breath and the other vital breaths issue. Emptiness is not only the supreme state that one should reach toward; conceived as a substance itself, it is found within all things, at the very heart of their substance and of their process of change.

Emptiness relates to *fullness*. Indeed, it is emptiness that enables all things that are *full* to attain their complete fullness. Thus Lao-tzu could say, "The great fullness is as though empty; thus it is inexhaustible" (chap. 15). Elsewhere he says: "The Way flows with the median emptiness; that is its usefulness. But never does it run out or brim over" (chap. 4).

In the order of external reality, emptiness is represented concretely by the valley. The valley is hollow, and one might say empty, but it makes things grow and nourishes them. Bearing all things within its bosom, the valley contains them without exceeding its capacities or being worn out.

LAO-TZU

> The spirit of the valley is forever alive. It is spoken of as the mysterious female. The mysterious female has an opening from which heaven and earth issue. This imperceptible spring flows indefinitely; one may draw from it without ever using it up. The spirit goes down into the valley and comes back up from it—that is breath. The spirit and the valley hold each other in an embrace—that is life. [chap. 6]

LAO-TZU

> Consciousness of the cock, capacity of the hen—they were the ravine of the world. Being the ravine of the world, they maintained the unity of constant virtue. They had accomplished the return to childhood. Consciousness of white, capacity of black—they were the norm of the world. Being the norm of the world, they maintained the uprightness of constant virtue. They had accomplished the return to no-limit. Consciousness of glory, capacity of humiliation—they were the outlet of the world. Being the outlet of the world, they were contented with constant virtue. They had accomplished the return to the uncontrived. [chap. 28]

CHUANG-TZU

> "Master, where are you going?" asked Squall. "To the Great Valley," said Dark Thickness. "Why?" "The Great Valley is the place where one can pour without ever filling up and draw forth without ever using up." ["Heaven and Earth"]

The image of the valley is connected with the image of water. Like the breaths, water appears inconstant, yet it penetrates everywhere and animates everything. Fullness makes up the visible aspect of structure, but emptiness structures use.

LAO-TZU

Nothing in the world is more pliant or weaker than water. But in attacking the strong, who will ever be like water? The emptiness in it makes it transformatory. [chap. 78]

LAO-TZU

What is most tender in the world wins in the long run over what is most solid. That-which-does-not-have penetrates that-which-does-not-have-any-emptiness. From that we learn the advantage of nonaction." [chap. 18]

Going on from the basic points contained in these last two quotations, Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu constantly use concrete examples to demonstrate the usefulness of emptiness.

LAO-TZU

The interval heaven-earth—one would say it is a bellows. Emptied, it remains inexhaustible. Activated, it only asks to breathe. We talk and talk. We calculate the infinite. It is better to keep to the center. The ten thousand existents only live as an integral part of the great movement initiated by the emptiness that moves through them. The hollow of heaven-earth gathers life. It is the vital nexus, the living center, the place of the formation of influxes and exchanges. [chap. 5]

LAO-TZU

Thirty spokes join in a single hub; the emptiness in the chariot permits its usefulness. From a lump of clay, one fashions a vase; the emptiness in the vase permits its usefulness. One makes doors and windows for a room; the emptiness in the room permits its usefulness. Being is what creates advantage, but nonbeing creates usefulness. [chap. 11]

CHUANG-TZU

My art consists in this: I display my emptiness. I begin the combat by attracting my adversary with an apparent advantage. I attack last, but strike first. ["Discourse on the Sword"]

CHUANG-TZU

The joints of an ox have spaces between them and the blade of the [butcher's] knife has no thickness. He who knows how to sink the very thin blade into the spaces handles his knife with ease, because he is working through the emptinesses. ["Principle of Hygiene"]

CHUANG-TZU

Emptiness is greatness. It is like the bird who sings spontaneously and identifies with the universe. ["Heaven and Earth"]

Emptiness-Fullness and Yin-Yang

At this point, it would be helpful to gain a precise idea of the principles of Taoist cosmology. Taoist cosmology has been the subject of too many commentaries and elucidations to summarize here. For our purposes, it will suffice to refer to the celebrated passage from chapter 42 of the *Lao-tzu*, a passage that contains the principal notions we have made use of so far: emptiness, the Tao, the primordial breath, the vital breaths, yin-yang, the ten thousand existents, and so forth.

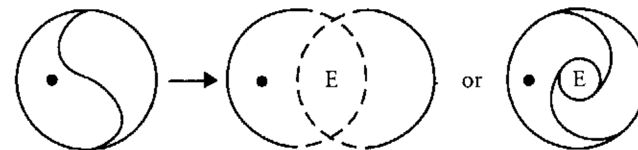
The original Tao gives birth to the one.
The one gives birth to the two.
The two gives birth to the three.
The three produces the ten thousand existents.
The ten thousand existents carry yin and embrace yang.
Harmony is born with the breath of median emptiness.

The original Tao is conceived as the supreme emptiness from which the one, which is none other than the primordial breath, emanates. This gives birth to the two, embodied by the two vital breaths of yin and yang. By their interaction, yang, as the active force, and yin, as receptive softness, govern the multiple vital breaths that animate the ten thousand existents of the created world. But between the two and the ten thousand existents, the three has its place.

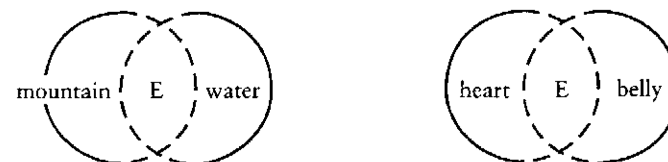
The three represents the combination of the vital breaths of yin and yang and the median emptiness mentioned in the last line of the passage. This median emptiness, itself a breath, issues from the original emptiness, from which it draws its power. Median emptiness is necessary for the harmonious functioning of the yin-yang pair; it attracts the two vital breaths and draws them into the process of reciprocal becoming. Without it, yin and yang would be in a relationship of frozen opposition. They would remain static substances and be formless. It is clearly this ternary relationship between yin and yang and median emptiness that gives birth to, and also serves as a model for, the ten thousand existents. For the median emptiness that resides at the heart of the yin-yang pair also resides at the heart of all things. Imbuing them with breath and life, it keeps all things in relationship to supreme emptiness, enabling them to enter into internal transformation and harmonious unity. Chinese cosmogony is thus dominated by two intersecting movements, which can be represented by two axes: a vertical axis representing the coming and going between emptiness and fullness, in which fullness originates from emptiness and emptiness continues to act within fullness; and a horizontal axis representing the interaction within fullness of the two complementary poles of yin and yang,

from which issue the ten thousand existents, including the human being, the microcosm par excellence.

We should therefore be careful not to mix up the two pairs of emptiness-fullness and yin-yang. The accompanying figures of the *t'ai-chi* allow us to show simultaneously the distinction between them and the intimate links that unite them (see illustration, in which E = emptiness).



A binary system that can be ternary and a ternary system that can be unitary: two equals three; three equals one. This is the seemingly paradoxical but constant mainspring of Chinese thought.[9] Emptiness is not merely a neutral space serving to defuse the shock without changing the nature of the opposition. It is the nodal point where potentiality and becoming interweave, in which deficiency and plenitude, self-sameness and otherness, meet. This conception also applies to the things of nature, as I talked about in connection with mountain-water in painting. It applies as well to the human body, notably in the view that the body, dominated by *shen* (spirit) and *ching* (essence)—or by the heart and the belly—acquires harmony through the median emptiness, which regulates the breaths that animate the body. (See illustration.)



Emptiness in Human Life

The privileged place given to the human being in Chinese thought is well known. Heaven, earth, and man are the three geniuses of the universe. At the same time as being a specific being, man unifies in himself the virtues of heaven and earth, and it falls to him to bring them into harmony through his own fulfillment. The Confucianists were especially preoccupied with human destiny and man's innate nature *(jen-hsing)*. Later on the Buddhists gave considerable attention to the problem of human desires *(jen-yü)*. The Taoists' desire to fit in with the movement of nature and the cosmos was reflected in their concern with *heart,* or the human spirit *(jen-hsin)*.

According to Chinese thought, especially Taoism, what primarily guarantees the communion between man and the universe is that man is a being not only of flesh and blood but also of breaths and spirits, who also possesses emptiness.

LI-CH'I

Man is formed from the combined virtue of heaven and earth, by the meeting of yin and yang, by the union of the lower spirits *(kui)* and the higher spirits, *(shen),* by the most subtle breaths of the five elements. ["Book of Rites"]

HUAI-NAN-TZU

The saints make heaven their father and earth their mother, yin and yang their ruling concern, and the four seasons their guiding thread.

CHUANG-TZU

Man is born from a condensation of breaths. ["Intelligence Journeys in the North"]

CHUANG-TZU

The body of man has a double emptiness; the heart of man has his perspective of heaven. ["External Things"]

CHUANG-TZU

Through his emptiness and his quietude, the saint rejoins the virtue of heaven. ["Torturing One's Mind"]

CHUANG-TZU

At his completion, the created being possesses an organized body. This body preserves the soul. Soul and body are each subject to their own laws. That is what is called innate nature. He who perfects his nature accomplishes the return to his original virtue. He who attains to his original virtue becomes identified with the origin of the universe and through that with emptiness. ["Heaven and Earth"]

Through emptiness, man's heart can become the model or mirror for itself and the world, because in possessing emptiness and being identified with original emptiness, man finds himself at the source of images and forms. He grasps the rhythm of space and time, and he masters the laws of transformation.

LAO-TZU

Yield to remain whole; bend to remain straight; empty for fullness; wither for renewal. With less, one finds oneself; with too much, one loses oneself. As for the saints, they embraced the one in order to be the world's model. [chap. 22]

CHUANG-TZU

How great is the mind of the saint. It is the mirror of the universe and of all beings. Emptiness, quietude, detachment, insipidity, silence, and nonaction are the level of the balance of the universe, the perfection of the Way and of virtue. That is why the sovereign and the

saint always remain at rest. This rest leads to emptiness, the emptiness that is fullness, the fullness that is totality. This emptiness confers on the soul a flexibility whose result is that every action performed is effective. ["The Way of Heaven"]

CHUANG-TZU

Don't listen with your ears but with your mind; don't listen with your mind but with your breath. Ears are limited to listening; the mind is limited to representing things. Only the breath that is emptiness can take possession of external objects. It is to emptiness that the Tao attaches itself. . . . From emptiness of mind springs light; in that the salvation of man is found. He who converts hearing and sight into an inner understanding and disowns his intelligence and his knowledge—the ancestral and other spirits will visit him. All that constitutes the secret of change. ["The World of Men"]

Only when the human heart becomes the mirror of itself and the world does the real possibility of living begin. Here we encounter the essential problem of human life as a duration with a relationship to time and space. This relationship, once again, is based on the affirmation of emptiness, which brings about constant qualitative change within space-time and thereby a constant qualitative change to human life itself. In the following passages Lao-tzu expresses, albeit in a laconic fashion, his thinking with regard to this problem.

LAO-TZU

The saints accomplish their tasks without delay. Since they do not delay, they remain forever. [chap. 2]

LAO-TZU

To overdevelop is to hasten old age. It is leaving the Way. And to leave the Way is to perish soon. [chap. 30]

LAO-TZU

He who knows how to be satisfied [with what he has] is rich; he who holds resolutely to the Tao fulfills himself. He who remains in his den lives to old age; he who dies without declining has long life. [chap. 33]

LAO-TZU

He who loves to excess becomes exhausted; he who accumulates much will lose much. Content with a little, he has nothing to fear. He who knows how to stop will be preserved; he will assure himself long life. [chap. 44]

LAO-TZU

Those who observed the Way refused to let themselves be filled up. Thus, never being filled up, they could remain preserved as young shoots and escape premature completion. [chap. 15]

LAO-TZU

Its name is not known to us; it is called the Way. In the absence of its real name, we call it great to express that it flows on, that it flows on pushing ever further, and having gone far in its going, it ends up effecting the return. [chap. 25]

LAO-TZU

Arrived at the extreme of emptiness *(hsü)*, firmly anchored in quietude, whereas the ten thousand existents come into being with a single leap, I contemplate the return. . . . Knowing the constant gives access to the infinite, the infinite to the universal, the universal to royalty, royalty to heaven, heaven to the Way, the Way to life that lasts, death can do nothing against me. [chap. 16]

We may note in these quotations Lao-tzu's preoccupation with duration. For him, duration implies holding to the Way. It is lasting in order to live, living without dying,

or again, living without declining. Human life is a journey in time, and it is important to bring about within the process of this journey what he calls the return. The return is not conceived as a stage that only happens "afterward." It is simultaneous with the journey, a constituent element of time. Within the order of life, how is it possible to engage in the process of becoming and growth, which necessarily means creating distance and particularization, while at the same time bringing about the return to the origin? The Taoist says it is possible because of emptiness. In the linear development of time, each intervention by emptiness introduces the circular movement that relinks the subject to the space of the origin. Emptiness, which resides at once within the origin and at the core of all things, is once more the guarantor of the proper functioning of life within space-time. Since lived time is nothing other than the actualization of living space, emptiness constitutes a kind of regulator that transforms each stage of life as lived experience into a space animated by the vital breaths. This is an indispensable condition for keeping open the possibility of genuine fullness.

Lao-tzu's remarks are too laconic to permit us to uncover all their implications in summarizing the essential problem of time and space in Taoist thought. It would be useful for the sake of further completing our knowledge to refer to a larger cultural context, especially to that seminal work, the *Book of Changes*.

As its title suggests, the basic idea of the *Book of Changes* is that of a process of change that governs all things and that above all governs the relations of the three entities known as heaven, earth, and man. Since man possesses, in addition to his own nature, the virtues of heaven and of earth, he can only fulfill himself by accepting responsibility for them. In this perspective, heaven and earth,

through their interaction, represent both space and time. (Later, during the Han period, we find in the *Huai-nan-tzu* the term *yü-chou*, "space-time," which designates the universe.) Time, essentially linked with earth, appears as actualized living space. Because it is living, space, essentially linked to heaven, appears as the guarantor of the just quality of time. Since they are animated by the same vital breaths, the two are interdependent and transmutable into each other. As components of life in the process of change, neither one is an abstract and separate concept or framework. They incarnate the quality of life itself.

The two principal currents of Chinese thought, Confucianism and Taoism, both draw upon the *Book of Changes*, each of them accentuating a particular aspect of it. Confucius exalts the yang virtue of heaven in man, thanks to which man dominates the earth. Citing the *Book of Changes*, Confucius says, "Following the example of the dynamic progress of heaven, the estimable man works within himself without respite." Lao-tzu extols the process through which man obeys the law of the earth, where yin dwells, in order to reconnect with heaven. From this difference in emphasis come two attitudes that are not so much divergent as they are complementary.

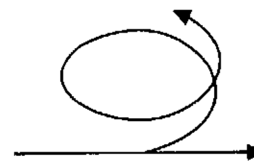
The Confucian person is actively engaged, eminently in possession of a sense of time and gradual becoming. Confucius says: "At fifteen, I committed myself to my studies. At thirty, having been initiated into the rites, I fortified myself. At forty, I was ignorant of nothing having to do with the way of virtue. At fifty, I was familiar with the decrees of heaven. At sixty, I had perfect discernment. At seventy, acting in everything in accordance with my desire, I in no way violated the order of things." The Taoist, whose gaze is turned toward heaven, immediately looks for the innate rapport with the time-transcending origin.

This distinction is so marked that a modern Chinese philosopher, Fang Tung-mei, said that to Confucius man is a man of time, but to Lao-tzu he is a man of space. Of course, the reality is far from being so simple and clear-cut, since heaven and earth are encompassed by the same circular movement of the Tao.

At the risk of repetition, I want to stress once more that it is emptiness that fosters interaction, even transmutation, between heaven and earth, and thereby, between space and time. If time is perceived as an actualization of living space, then emptiness, by introducing discontinuity into the temporal process of unfolding, in some way reinvests time with the quality of space, thus assuring the proper rhythm of the breaths and the totality of the relationships. This qualitative change of time into space (which is not a mere matter of a spatial representation of time or of a system of correspondence that only makes it possible to measure one by the other) is the essential condition of a true life that is not one-dimensional or of one-sided development. Thus, with regard to the manner in which man should live space-time *(hsü-hsin)*, Confucius and Lao-tzu both proposed *emptiness of heart*, which makes humans capable of interiorizing the entire process of qualitative change that I have been discussing. Emptiness implies interiorization and totalization.

The *Book of Changes* serves as the unified basis for the seemingly opposed doctrines of Confucianism and Taoism. According to the traditional interpretation, the term *change* in the book has three meanings: *pu-i* (nonchanging change), *chien-i* (simple change), and *pien-i* (changing change). Roughly speaking, we could say that nonchanging change corresponds to original emptiness, simple change corresponds to the regular movement of the cosmos, and changing change corresponds to the evolution

of particular existents. The three kinds of change are not separate. They take place concurrently, thus shaping the simultaneously complex and unified course of the Tao. This idea determined the conception of human development and history in China over the course of two millennia. In the existence of a particular being, time follows a double movement: linear (in the sense of the changing change) and circular (toward the nonchanging change). This is represented in the accompanying illustration.



On the historical level, we can also observe a kind of time that unfolds from cycle to cycle. These cycles (which are not infinite repetitions) are separated by emptiness while they also follow a spiral movement, since they too are attracted by the nonchanging change.

2 Emptiness in Chinese Painting

CHINESE PAINTING EVOLVED from a tradition marked by realism toward a conception that became more and more spiritual. By "spiritual," I do not mean the painting of religious subjects—which always existed in the course of history, particularly in the Buddhist tradition—but rather painting that reaches toward a spiritual process. This spirituality was essentially inspired by Taoism and enriched later on by the philosophy of Ch'an. In the T'ang period, thanks to the works of painters like Wang Wei or Wu Taotzu, a kind of painting dominated by emptiness came into being. This was to reach its apogee during the Sung and Yüan periods.

On the theoretical level, well before the time of the T'ang dynasty, as early as the Six Dynasties period, which saw the inception of a critical philosophy of art, the notion

of emptiness was given prominence by theoreticians such as Hsieh Ho and Tsung Ping. Henceforth, emptiness was to remain the principal theme in Chinese aesthetic thought. This philosophy can draw upon a particularly abundant literature. Here, in chronological order, is the list of authors and texts which I shall cite in the course of our study:[10]

SIX DYNASTIES	
Tsung Ping	*Hua shan-shui hsü*[11]
Hsieh Ho	*Ku-hua p'in lu*
T'ANG	
Wang Wei	*Hua-hsüeh mi-chüeh* and *Shan-shui fu*[12]
Chang Yen-yuan	*Li-tai ming-hua chi*
Ching Hao	*Pi-fa chi*[13]
SUNG	
Kuo Hsi	*Lin-ch'uan kao-chih chi*[14]
Kuo Jo-hsu	*T'u-hua chien-wen chih*
Mi Fu	*Hua shih*
Su Tung-po	*Lun hua*
Han Chuo	*Shan-shui ch'un ch'üan-chi*[15]
YÜAN	
Huang Kung-wang	*Hsieh shan-shui chüeh*[16]
MING	
Tung Ch'i-ch'ang	*Hua chih* and *Hua yen*[17]
Li Jih-hua	*Chu lan hua ying* and *Wei shui hsüan jih chi*
Shen Hao	*Hua chu*[18]

Mo Shih-lung	*Hua shuo*[19]
Shih-t'ao	*Hua yü lu*[20]
CHING	
T'ang Tai	*Hui-shih fa-wei*[21]
Hua Lin	*Nan tsung chüeh-mi*[22]
Cheng Hsieh (Pan Ch'iao)	*T'i hua*
Chiang Ho	*Hsüeh hua tsa-lun*[23]
Fan Chi	*Kuo-yun-lu hua-lun*
Chang Shih	*Hua t'an*[24]
Shen Tsung-ch'ien	*Chieh-chou hsüeh-hua pien*[25]
Pu Yen-t'u	*Hua-hsüeh hsin-fa wen ta*[26]
Wang Yu	*Tung-chuang lun-hua*[27]
T'ang I-fen	*Hua-ch'uan hsi-lan*[28]
Fang Hsün	*Shan-ching-chü hua-lun*[29]
Ting Hao	*Hsieh-chen mi-chüeh*
Wang Kai	*Chieh-tzu-yuan hua-chuan*
MODERN PERIOD	
Huang Pin-hung	*Hua yü lu*

Before proposing a semiotic study based on these texts, I want to recall certain fundamental philosophical ideas on which Chinese painting is based.[30] Let us first recall the importance of cosmology. Cosmology is important because a painting does not aim merely at being an aesthetic object but rather seeks to become a microcosm that is itself creative in the manner of the macrocosm, an open space in which real life is possible. (Wang Wei said, "By means of a slim brush, re-create the immense body of emptiness." Tsung Ping said: "Once spiritual contact is established, the essential forms will be realized; the spirit of the universe

will also be captured. Will not a painting then be as real as nature itself?") This is the point of view that gives prime importance to the notion of breath. If the universe arises from the primordial breath and only moves owing to the vital breaths, then these same breaths must bring life to a painting. Failure to capture the breath is the very sign of a mediocre painting.

Correlated with the notion of breath is that of yin-yang, which embodies the dynamic laws governing all things. In painting, yin-yang gives birth to the idea of polarity (heaven-earth, mountain-water, far-near, and the like), on the one hand, and that of *li* (the inner laws, or inner lines, of things), on the other. Driven by these two ideas, painting was no longer content merely to reproduce the exterior of things; it sought to capture their inner lines and hold fast the hidden relations between them. (Tsung Ping said: "Spirit has no form of its own; it is through things that it takes form. Thus, the idea is to trace the inner lines of things by means of brushstrokes inhabited by shadow and by light. When things are adequately caught in this way, they become the representation of truth itself.")

This is the philosophical and aesthetic context in which the central element of Chinese painting, the brushstroke, takes its place. Later on, we will thoroughly examine the specifically pictorial content of the stroke. In the present philosophical context, it is sufficient to point out that, in the eyes of the Chinese painter, the execution of the brushstroke is the link between humans and the supernatural. For through its internal unity and its capacity for variation, the brushstroke is one and many. It embodies the process through which man returns in painting to the original gestures of creation. The act of executing the stroke corresponds to the very act that draws the one forth from chaos and that separates heaven and earth. The stroke is simulta-

neously breath, yin-yang, heaven-earth, and the ten thousand existents, while it also takes on the rhythm and secret instincts of man.

Taken as a whole, these elements form a coherent network that can only function owing to a factor that is always implicit: emptiness. In painting, as in the universe, the breaths would not circulate and yin-yang would not operate without emptiness. Without emptiness, the brushstroke, which implies volume and light, rhythm and color, would be unable to manifest all its potentialities. In the execution of a painting, emptiness comes into play at every level, from the basic strokes to the composition of the whole. It is a sign among the signs, providing the pictorial system with its effectiveness and unity.

Five levels can be distinguished, and we will examine them successively. With the exception of the last, each level is characterized by a binary term that is part of the theory of painting: (1) brush-ink, (2) yin-yang, (3) mountain-water, (4) man-heaven, and (5) the fifth dimension. These levels are not discrete; they form an organic whole. Within this whole, emptiness follows a spiral movement, starting from a center and circling from level to level, as though to untie a knot. This organic conception of a painting reminds us once again of the human body (see chapters 1 and 2) in which the heart, with the median emptiness dwelling within it, concentrates the breaths and then sends them off again to the organs and viscera. This comparison with the human body also reminds us that painting, rather than being a purely aesthetic exercise, is a discipline that engages the whole of a human being, the physical being as well as the spiritual being, the conscious part as well as the unconscious part.

The dichotomy of emptiness and fullness is certainly not the exclusive preserve of the Chinese. It is present in varying degrees in everything that has to do with the pictorial or sculptural arts. This study will show the implications of it in the Chinese sphere in each of its stages. In view of what we have already seen, it is already possible to delimit the nature of this particular manifestation. Emptiness-fullness does not appear here merely as an opposition of form or as a technique for creating depth within space. Vis-à-vis fullness, emptiness is a living entity. The motive force of all things, it is found at the very core of fullness, which it infuses with vital breaths. The consequences of its action are to disrupt one-dimensional development, to arouse inner transformation, and to elicit circular motion. It would take an original organicist conception of the universe to enable us to apprehend the reality of this emptiness.[31]

Brush-Ink

At the root of all theories of Chinese painting, we find the notion of brush-ink. This is more specifically linked to ink painting *(shui-mo-hua)* in which black ink, with its endless nuances, seems sufficiently rich in the eyes of the painter to incarnate all the variations of color that nature has to offer. Ink must be associated with the brush, for in isolation it remains just potential material, to which only the brush can give life. Indeed, their intimate union is often symbolized by sexual union. There is, nevertheless, a division of labor. Following so many others before him, Han Chuo of the Sung period said, "The brush to give birth to substance and form, the ink to capture color and light." Given the rich content that each one is assigned, we are going to study the brush and the ink separately, beginning with the brush.

Brush designates both the instrument and the stroke that

it executes. I have already pointed out the philosophical significance of the one stroke, but here I will examine it from a properly pictorial point of view. The brushstroke is not a line with no depth dimension, nor is it a mere outline of forms. As I have said, it seeks to capture the *li,* the inner line of things, as well as the breath that animates them. (Su Tung-po said: "Mountain, rock, bamboo, tree, ripples in water, mist and clouds—none of these things of nature has a fixed form. But, nonetheless, they all have a constant inner line. That is what must guide the mind of the painter.") Through its thickness and fineness, its concentratedness and dilutedness, its verve and reserve, the brushstroke is at once form and hue, volume and rhythm, the implication of density based on economy of means and of totality that encompasses the very instincts of man. Through its unity, the brushstroke resolves the conflict that every painter feels between drawing and color and between the representation of volume and the representation of movement.[32]

The art of the brushstroke was aided in China by the existence of calligraphy and by the fact that, in painting, the creation of a picture is instantaneous and rhythmic. The very formation of ideograms got the Chinese in the habit of grasping concrete things in terms of the essential strokes that characterize them. Calligraphy then came along and exploited the plastic beauty of these strokes. The art of calligraphy is based in part on the harmonious or contrasting structure of the strokes and in part on the sensual and varied aspect of the strokes as composed of thickness and fineness. Ending up with a rapid, cursive style, calligraphy ultimately introduced the notions of rhythm and breath. It thus became a complete art. While practicing this art, the calligrapher has the impression of

being fully involved, for it is simultaneously an engagement of the body, the mind, and the sensibilities.

Calligraphy exercised a profound influence on the discipline of painting. As early as the T'ang period, particularly beginning with Wu Tao-tzu, paintings were executed in a spontaneous fashion without any retouching. Artists maintained a steady rhythm of their gestures, which they tried not to break. Such a conception of the execution of a picture presupposed that the painter was in advance in possession of a vision of the whole and of the concrete details of what he was going to paint. Indeed, before painting a picture, an artist had to go through a long period of apprenticeship, during which he strove to master the many types of brushstrokes representing the many types of beings or things, brushstrokes that were the result of a minute observation of nature.

It was only when the painter was in possession of the vision and the details of the outer world that he began to paint. The execution, instantaneous and rhythmic, thus became a projection of the shapes of external reality as well as of the inner world of the artist. It is in this sense that Shih-t'ao, in speaking of the one stroke, says that it is the stroke that unifies the mind of man and the universe. While revealing the irresistible instincts of man, the stroke remains faithful to external reality. It is also in this sense that we should understand the famous adage of Chang Tsao of the T'ang period: "Outside, take creation as your model; inside follow the source of the soul."

All the great painters stressed that, before painting, it was necessary to possess nature "by heart."[33]

Su Tung-po

> Before you can paint bamboo, it first must grow in your inmost heart. Then, brush in hand, gaze concentrated,

the vision springs forth before you. This vision—capture it immediately with the strokes of your brush, because it can disappear as suddenly as a hare at the approach of the hunter.

WANG YU
It is from the very soul of the painter that the mountains and caves spring forth!

SHEN TSUNG-CH'IEN
The universe is made up of vital breaths and the painting is accomplished by means of brush-ink. The painting only attains excellence when the breaths emanating from the brush-ink so harmonize with those of the universe that they are one with them. A coherent path then appears through the apparent disorder of phenomena. Therefore, it is important that the idea of all things be already completed in the heart of the artist, so that the execution of the picture—which spontaneously actualizes dilutedness-concentratedness, lightness-darkness, tenderness-power, and potentiality-manifestation—can be animated by the vital current that indwells in the universe. The whole superior quality of the picture depends on this.

Only emptiness makes possible the full functioning of the brushstroke. If the stroke is to be animated by the breaths and by rhythm, it is above all necessary that emptiness precede it, extend it, and even pervade it. And if it is possible for the stroke to at once embody both lines and volumes, it is because its thickness and fineness and the emptiness that encloses or delimits it shows and suggests them.

BREATH AND RHYTHM

Breath and rhythm are interdependent notions. They are brought together in the first of the six canons of painting established by Hsieh Ho in the fifth century: "Generate and give life to the rhythmic breath."[34] In a brushstroke, this rhythmic breath cannot obtain except through the quality of emptiness that the stroke contains or implies.

WANG WEI
In painting a landscape, the concept [of rhythmic breath] alone should guide the brush.

CHING HAO
The brush possesses four substances: muscle, flesh, bone, and breath.

CHANG YEN-YUAN
On the subject of collaborating in the work of creation through the intermediary of the brush, it has been said: The idea [of emptiness] must precede the brush. In the same way, it must extend it once the stroke has ended. A stroke executed according to the rule is a dead stroke. The only painting that is real is that in which the brush is guided by the spirit and is concentrated on the one.

SHEN TSUNG-CH'IEN
The play of the brush must be dominated by the breath. When the breath exists, the vital energy exists. That is when the brush truly gives birth to the divine.

PU YEN-T'U
Before heaven-earth was the idea. The pivot of change, it aroused ten thousand transformations; the soul of painting, it gave birth to ten thousand images. In the case of a superior painter, the idea precedes [and goes beyond] the brush. Indeed, it is better for the idea to extend the brush than the converse. . . . When the divine magic is working, the brush-ink attains the void. Then there is brush beyond brush and ink beyond ink. It only remains to act according to one's desire, and there is nothing that is not a miracle, for it is the work of heaven.

HUANG PIN-HUNG

> In the executed stroke, there has to be the rhythm: one, two, three ripples. . . . In painting, connecting one line with another does not amount to grafting one branch onto another. A graft has solidity in view, whereas the execution of brushstrokes seeks not to stifle the breath. . . . A line is made up of points. Each of the points has an existence of its own: It promises a multitude of transformations. To place a point is to plant a seed. The seed must grow and develop. . . . Even in making a point, it is suitable for there to be emptiness in the fullness. Only then does the point become living, as though animated by the spirit. . . . A picture begins with the marks of brush-ink and seeks to end up with the non-marks of brush-ink. To start from the distinct and tangible and attain full-blown emptiness—that is not within reach of the beginner.

For the stroke to be animated by the breath, emptiness must not only inhabit the stroke; it must also actually guide the wrist of the painter. Shih-t'ao stresses the importance of the *hsü-wan* (empty wrist) in his *Remarks on Painting. Empty wrist* does not indicate a hand that is without force as the painter holds the brush. On the contrary, it is the result of great concentration, of fullness intensified to the extreme. The painter is not to begin painting until his hand reaches this point of culmination, and then it suddenly yields to emptiness. We can refer also to the very technical remarks of Ch'eng Yao-t'ien:

> Emptiness acts at all levels of the body when one does calligraphy [or paints]. At each level, fullness, once it is ripe, yields to emptiness, and that takes place in the following order: the lower limbs → the upper limbs → the left side of the body → the right side of the body → the right shoulder → the right arm → the wrist → the fingers → the brush. . . . Emptiness has a double effect. Owing to it, the force of the stroke penetrates the paper to the point of going right through it, and also everything on the surface of the paper comes alive, moved by the breath.[35]

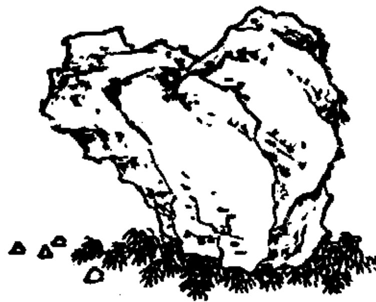
Two types of brushstrokes most particularly suggest inner emptiness:

1. *Kan-pi* (dry brush): The brush is only slightly soaked in ink. The stroke it makes strikes a balance between presence and absence, between substance and spirit, and thus creates an impression of reserved harmony, as though it is impregnated with emptiness. The great master of the *kan-pi* was Ni Tsan Yuan, in whose work connoisseurs savor the "ineffable flavor."
2. *Fei-pan* (flying white): The hairs of the brush, instead of being compacted concentrically, are spread out in such a way that a rapid stroke contains white in the middle. The effect of this is the union of power and lightness, as if the stroke were perforated by the breath.

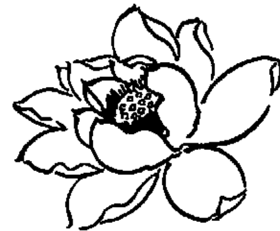
A third type of stroke that should be mentioned is the *ts'un* (rippled stroke or modeled stroke). This stroke is particularly linked to the problem of form. I shall present it in the following section.

FORM AND VOLUME

The *ts'un* (see the illustrations on pages 72–73) is a rippled stroke used to shape form or to suggest the volume of objects. There is a great variety of this type of stroke,



various modeled strokes



various drawings

capable of representing the many types of forms observed in nature (trees, rocks, mountains, clouds, dwellings, human figures, and so forth). These strokes often have picturesque or metaphorical names, such as *scrolled cloud, scattered hemp, unraveled rope, broken net, devil's face, skeleton's skull, fragment of jade, tangled faggot,* or *axe-trimmed.* Made up of hooks, angles, or curves, the *ts'un* plays upon thickness and fineness, but also on the emptiness it encloses or delimits, in order to simultaneously suggest form and movement and color and relief.

TUNG CH'I-CH'ANG

Hardly does the brush touch the paper and already shapes in relief appear!

MO SHIH-LUNG

Oh, the primordial importance of brush-ink! The brush is not realized when one traces an outline without a stroke method; the ink is not realized when the executed stroke is devoid of lightness-darkness and back-front. The ancients used to say that a painted rock should be seen from three sides. This depends on both the brush and the ink.

FANG HSÜN

The brushstroke includes front-back and fullness-emptiness. An accomplished artist should be able to show things as seen from various sides with a few movements of the brush.

CHENG PAN-CH'AO

The painter Wan Ko of Hsi-chiang is an eminent disciple of Pa-ta-shan-jen. He is endowed with the special talent of being able to depict a rock with a single movement of the brush. And the three-dimensional aspects of the rock as well as its sinuous and sensual aspects appear in their most minute details.

PU YEN-T'U

In the rippled stroke, there is the opposition of fullness and emptiness. In the execution, it is important to vary their interplay: the compact and concentrated alternating with the hollow and fine, the whole thing extended by the spirit.

HUANG PIN-HUNG

In keeping the measure [or holding the balance] in ramifying the rippled strokes, they should overlap one another without becoming entangled, yield ground to each other without collision. To suggest that, the ancients used the image of numerous porters passing each other on the road: How they know how to avoid one another while being at the same time so closely pressed together!

HUANG PIN-HUNG

The rippled strokes can be so densely placed that no air can pass between them, while at the same time giving the impression that horses could easily gallop among them.[36]

In the representation of forms by means of the stroke, an important notion is that of *yin-hsien* (invisible-visible). It applies especially to landscape painting, where the artist has to cultivate the art of not showing everything in order to keep the breath alive and the mystery intact. This is achieved by interrupting the strokes (strokes that are too connected stifle the breath) and by omission, partial or total, of shapes in the landscape. The image of the dragon coiling in and out of the clouds is often called on to suggest the charm of *yin-hsien,* as some of the following quotations show.

WANG WEI

The tip of a tower loses itself in the sky and its base should remain invisible. Things should be at once pres-

ent and absent; you only see the top or the bottom of them. Of haystacks or rises in the ground, let only half be seen; of cottages and pavilions, only indicate a section of wall or an eave.[37]

CHANG YEN-YUAN

In painting, one should avoid worrying about accomplishing a work that is too diligent and too finished in the depiction of forms and the notation of colors or one that makes too great a display of one's technique, thus depriving it of mystery and aura. That is why one should not fear the incomplete, but quite to the contrary, one should deplore that which is too complete. From the moment one knows that a thing is complete, what need is there to complete it? For the incomplete does not necessarily mean the unfulfilled. Indeed, the defect of the unfulfilled is precisely the failure to recognize a thing as complete enough. When one paints a waterfall [or a spring], the brushstrokes should be interrupted without the breath's being interrupted; the forms should be discontinuous without the spirit being so. Such is the case with a divine dragon in the midst of clouds: Its head and tail do not seem to be connected, but its being is animated by a single breath.

LI JIH-HUA[38]

In painting, what is important is knowing how to hold and, equally, how to let go. Knowing how to hold consists in delimiting the outline and volume of things by means of strokes of the brush. But if the painter makes use of continuous or rigid strokes, the picture will be devoid of life. In the delineation of forms, although the goal may be to arrive at a full result, the entire art of execution lies in gaps and fragmentary suggestions. Hence, one must know how to let go. This means that the movements of the painter's brush must be interrupted [without interruption of the breath that is animating them] in order to deal more effectively with innuendos. Thus, a mountain might include areas that are unpainted, and a tree made to do without a portion of its branches. In this way, these forms remain in a state of becoming, between being and nonbeing.

T'ANG I-FEN

A mountain, when it is too full, must be made empty with mist and haze; when it is too empty, it has to be made full by adding pavilions and terraces. . . . Beyond the mountains, other mountains; apparently separate, they are nevertheless linked. Beyond trees, ever more trees; although apparently interwoven, they are without connections. . . . When the entire scene finally emerges, the truth of it does not depend on the abundance of brushstrokes. There, where the mind's gaze focuses, a whole image is altogether needless.

PU YEN-T'U

All things under heaven have their visible-invisible. The visible is the thing's exterior aspect, its yang; the invisible is its interior image, its yin. A yin, a yang—that is the Tao. It is like a dragon coiling in midheaven. If it shows its naked entirety, without aura and without extension, with what mystery can it be enveloped? That is why a dragon always takes cover behind the clouds. Transporting the winds and rains, it soars amid the lightning bolts, wheeling and spinning—superb! Now he causes his scales to glitter, now he gives a hint of his tail. The spectator, eyes gaping, can never encompass him with a glance. It is through its double aspect of visible-invisible that the dragon exercises its infinite power of fascination. . . .

The landscape that fascinates a painter must therefore include both the visible and the invisible. All the elements of nature that appear finite are in reality linked with the infinite. In order to integrate the infinite into

the finite, to combine the visible and the invisible, painters must know how to take full advantage of the play of fullness-emptiness of which the brush is capable and of the play of concentratedness-dilutedness of which the ink is capable. They can begin with emptiness and make it verge on fullness, or the reverse. The brush must be mobile and vigorous—above all, banality must be avoided. The ink must be nuanced and varied—keep from falling into the obvious. Do not forget that the charm of a thousand mountains and a thousand valleys lies in their hidden curves and secret joinings. There, where the hills embrace one another, where the rocks open to each other, where the trees intermingle, the houses huddle, the road loses itself in the distance, the bridge is mirrored in the water, one must make use of whites in such a way that the halo of the mists and the reflections of the clouds compose an atmosphere charged with grandeur and mystery. Presence without form but endowed with an unwavering inner structure—the whole art of the visible-invisible is not more than what is needed to re-create it!

Yin-Yang (Darkness-Brightness)

The extensive use of the yin-yang pair in the Chinese cultural domain is well known. It is applicable on every level, from cosmology to individual beings and things. In painting, yin-yang is taken in a very precise sense: It has to do with the action of light, which is expressed by the play of ink. The action of light pertains not only to the contrast of lightness and darkness that characterizes all things but also to everything that light rules: atmosphere, tonality, the sculptural quality of forms, the impression of distance, and so forth.

In talking about the play of ink, I mean primarily the black ink used in monochrome painting. (I should nevertheless point out that painting using mineral pigments has always existed in China, notably the style known as *gold and jade.*) Chinese painting, at its apogee during the Sung and Yüan periods, favored ink over colored paints. In its internal contrasts, ink seemed sufficiently rich to express the infinite nuances of nature, and in combination with the art of the brushstroke, ink offered that unity that, as we have seen, resolves the contradiction between drawn line and color and between the representation of volume and the rhythm of the breath. In its double quality of being at once one and many, ink, like the brush, was considered a direct manifestation of the original universe. In this perspective, the aim of the painter in using ink is not so much to reproduce the effects of light as it is to tap this light at its source. The gaze of the painter is turned inward, for after a gradual assimilation of external phenomena, the effects of the ink that he gives rise to become nothing other than the nuanced expression of his soul.[39]

The painters never tired of communicating their minute observations on the variations of atmosphere and the nuances of tonalities perceived in landscapes. Thus, in his celebrated *Shan-shui fu,* Wang Wei says:

> In the rain, we do not distinguish between heaven and earth or between east and west. If there is a wind blowing unaccompanied by rain, the gaze is primarily attracted by the stirring branches of trees. But when there is rain without wind, the trees look weighted down. Passersby wear their rain hats, and fishermen wear their straw mantles. After rain, the clouds take flight and give place to an azure sky with halos of faint mist. The mountains are emphasized by brilliant patches of emer-

ald, while the sun, flashing forth its slanting rays, looks very close.

At dawn, the peaks detach themselves from the night. In the growing light, in which there is still a mixture of silvery fog and confused colors, an indistinct moon goes down. At dusk, on the horizon gilded by the setting sun, a few sails glide on the river. People hurry home; the houses have their doors ajar.

In spring, the countryside is enveloped by mists and vapors; the rivers are tinged with blue, the hills with green. In summer, the tall old trees hide the sky. There are no ripples on the lake. In the heart of the mountain, the waterfall seems to fall from the clouds, and in the solitary pavilion, one can smell the fresh coolness of the water. In autumn, the sky is the color of jade; the forest becomes matted and secretive; the wild geese fly over the river; a few herons keep to the bank. In winter, snow covers the ground; a woodcutter walks along, loaded with faggots; at the point where the low-lying water meets the sand, a fisherman moves alongside his boat.

In paying so much attention to the nuances of a landscape going through the changing seasons, the painter is in reality expressing the states of his own soul. Kuo Hsi, in his *Shan-shui hsün,* says:

> The mountains in springtime are wrapped in a garland of clouds and haze; man feels joyful among them. The mountains of summer are rich with shady foliage; man feels at peace among them. The mountains of autumn remain serene amid the falling leaves; man looks grave and solemn. The mountains in winter are heavy with dark thick clouds; man remains distant and silent.

Six different types of ink are distinguished and are considered independent colors: dry, diluted, white, wet, concentrated, and black. These are divided into two parallel groups forming three contrasting pairs: dry-wet, diluted-concentrated, and white-black.

Coming back to our main theme, I want to stress the importance here of emptiness. The link between emptiness and color has its spiritual basis in a famous Buddhist-inspired phrase: "Color is emptiness; emptiness is color." Here, color refers to the shimmering manifestation of the phenomenal world. The more this manifestation is animated by emptiness, which reveals its unfathomable mystery, the better expressed it is. Technically, emptiness is rendered by a whole range of nuances of color, particularly the three types of the first group: dry, diluted, and white. The ink is used with the brush in three ways to convey emptiness supporting the dynamic vibration of breath.

1. *P'o-mo* (split ink): Once the general configuration and the vague outlines of objects have been established, this stroke introduces modeling by means of *ts'un,* the rippled stroke.
2. *P'o-mo* (splattered ink): This is painting with broad movements with a brush soaked in ink. The strokes thus executed resemble more or less pronounced splotches without contours.
3. *Hsüan-jan:* This is wash drawing, or the art of using wet, diluted ink to suggest tonal nuances in atmosphere.

WANG WEI

> In the realm of painting, ink painting [wash drawing] is the best of all. It captures the essence of nature and perfectly completes the work of creation.

PU YEN-T'U

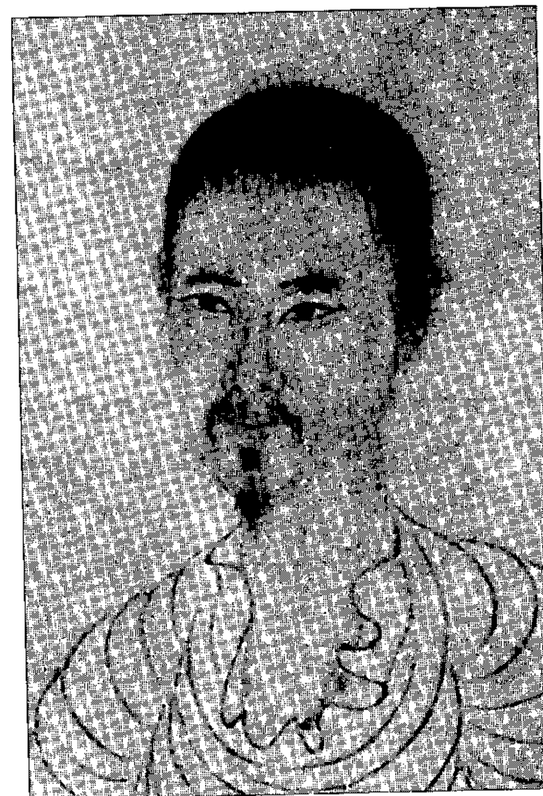
> When divine power is operating, brush-ink attains the void. Then there is brush beyond brush, ink beyond ink.

There is nothing to do but to act in accordance with the rhythm of one's heart, and then there will be nothing that is not miraculous. For it is the work of heaven. . . . The art of ink is magic and almost supernatural! . . . With the six colors of ink the painter incarnates the laws of creation. What is called "inkless" is not completely devoid of ink; it is an extension of dry-diluted. Whereas dry-diluted remains marked by fullness, inkless is totally empty. There exists an intermediate state, *ch'iu-jan,* which suggests emptiness with fullness.

By alternating emptiness and fullness, one exhausts the potentialities of ink. If it is easy for brush-ink to paint the visible, fullness, it is more difficult for it to represent the invisible, emptiness. Between mountain and water, the lights of hazes and the shadows of clouds are constantly changing. Now they appear, now they are gone. Vividly manifest or concealed, they harbor in their bosom the breath and the spirit. The ancients sought to fathom their mystery by every means—to grasp their breath by brush-without-ink and to seize their spirit by ink-without-ink.

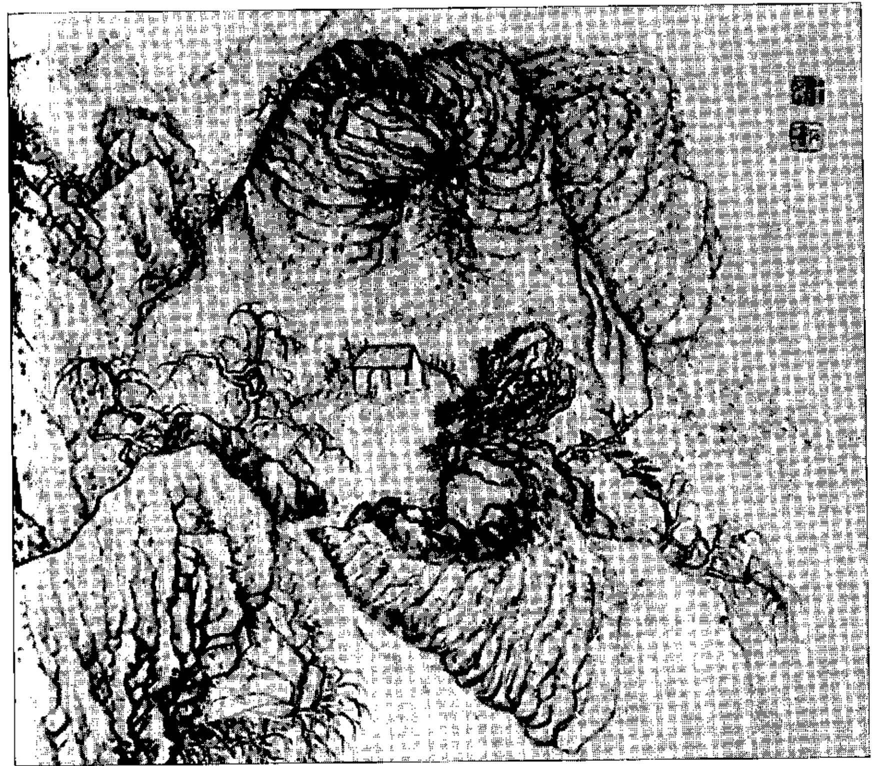
Ting Kao

Everything in the universe is dominated by yin-yang. For light, brightness is yang and darkness is yin. For habitations, the outside is yang and the inside is yin. For objects, the upper part is yang and the lower, yin. If you want to convey the effect of yin-yang, there must be emptiness-fullness in the brush. Moreover, as there is yang within yin and yin within yang, it is equally necessary that in the brush there be emptiness within the fullness and fullness within the emptiness. The emptiness that is incarnated by diluted ink represents the process that goes from being to nothingness; the fullness incarnated by concentrated ink marks the lines and forms. In painting, as in the universe, emptiness is the "clothing" of yang and fullness the heart of yin.



1. Shih-tao, *Self-portrait.*
Private collection, Taipei.

2. SHIH-TAO, *The Painter in a Boat.*

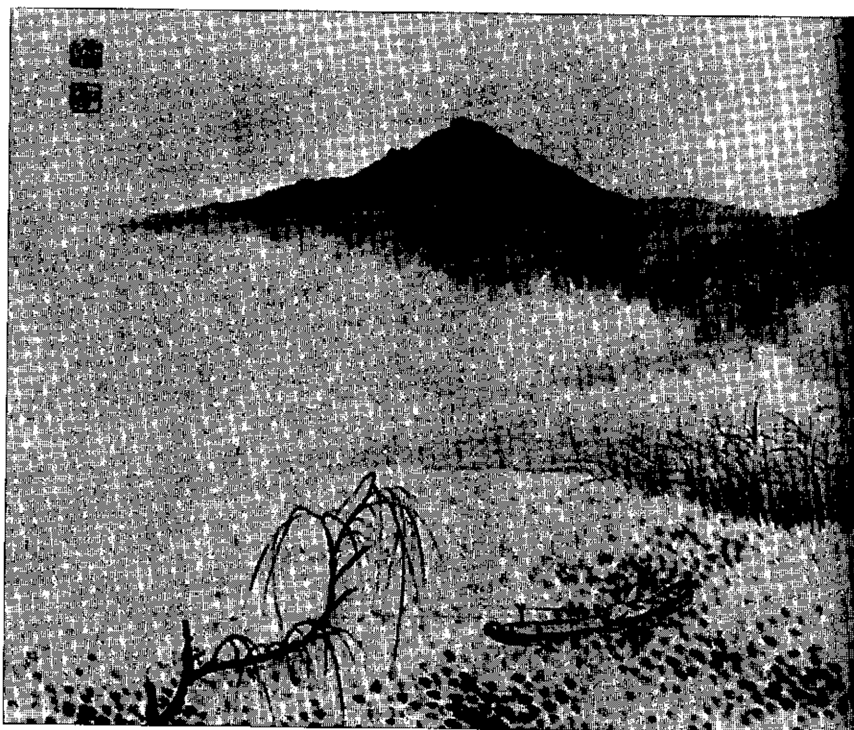


3. SHIH-TAO, *Landscape.* Nü-wa Chai Collection.

4. SHIH-TAO, *Landscape.* Nü-wa Chai Collection.

5. SHIH-TAO, *Landscape.*
John L. Severance Collection, Cleveland Museum of Art.

6. SHIH-TAO, *Landscape.*
Trustees of the British Museum.

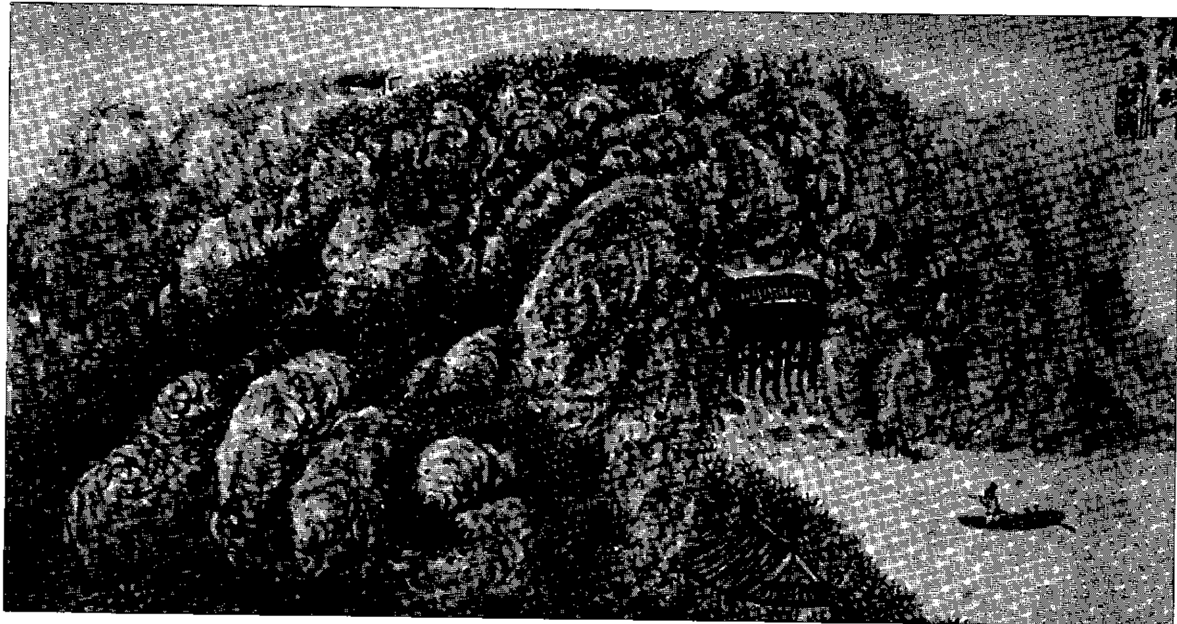


10. SHIH-TAO, *Painter-Fisherman*. Nü-wa Chai Collection.

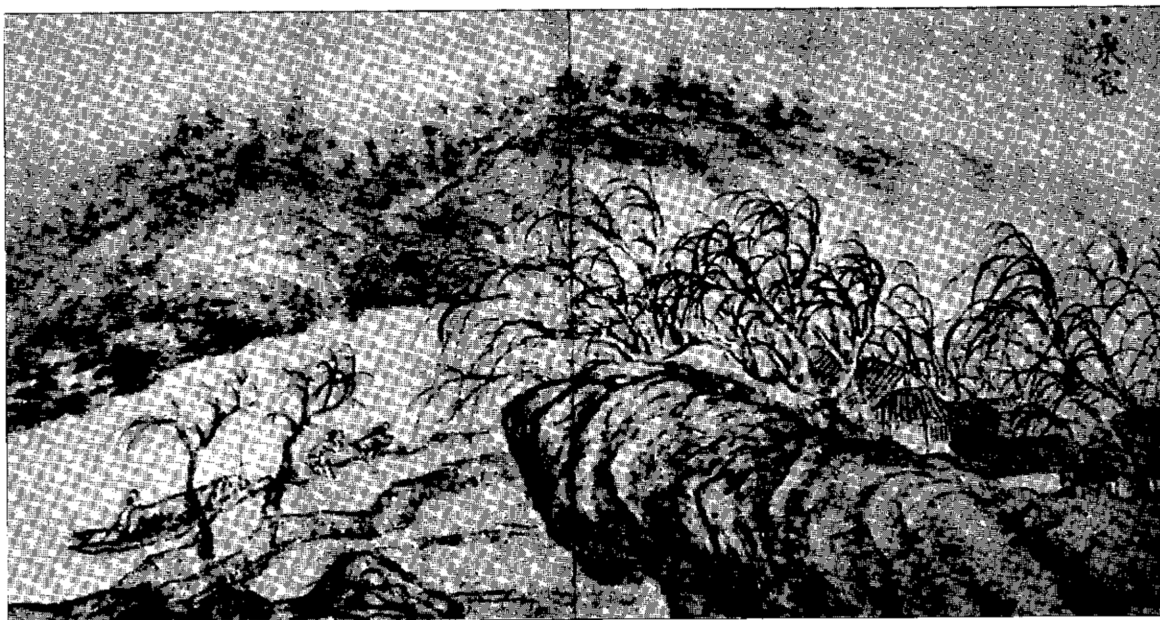
11. SHIH-TAO, *Rock, Bamboo, Orchid*.
Arthur Sackler Foundation, New York.

12. SHIH-TAO, *Leaves and Flowers.*

13. SHIH-TAO, *Plum Branches in Flower.*
Princeton University Art Museum.



14. SHIH-TAO, *Landscape.*



15. SHIH-TAO, *Landscape.*

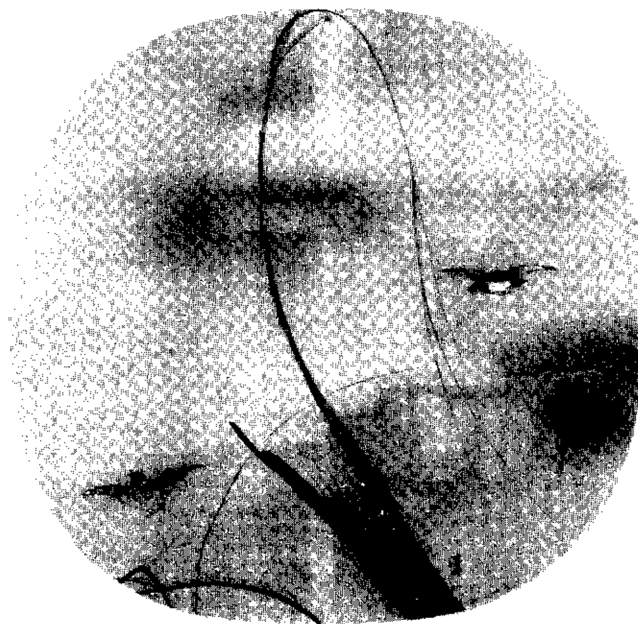
16. SHIH-TAO, *Landscape*. Guimet Museum.

17. SHIH-TAO, *Mount Lu*.
Sumitomo Collection, Oiso, Japan.

18. SHIH-TAO, *The Yellow River.*

19. CHÜ JAN, *Landscape.* Taipei Palace Museum.

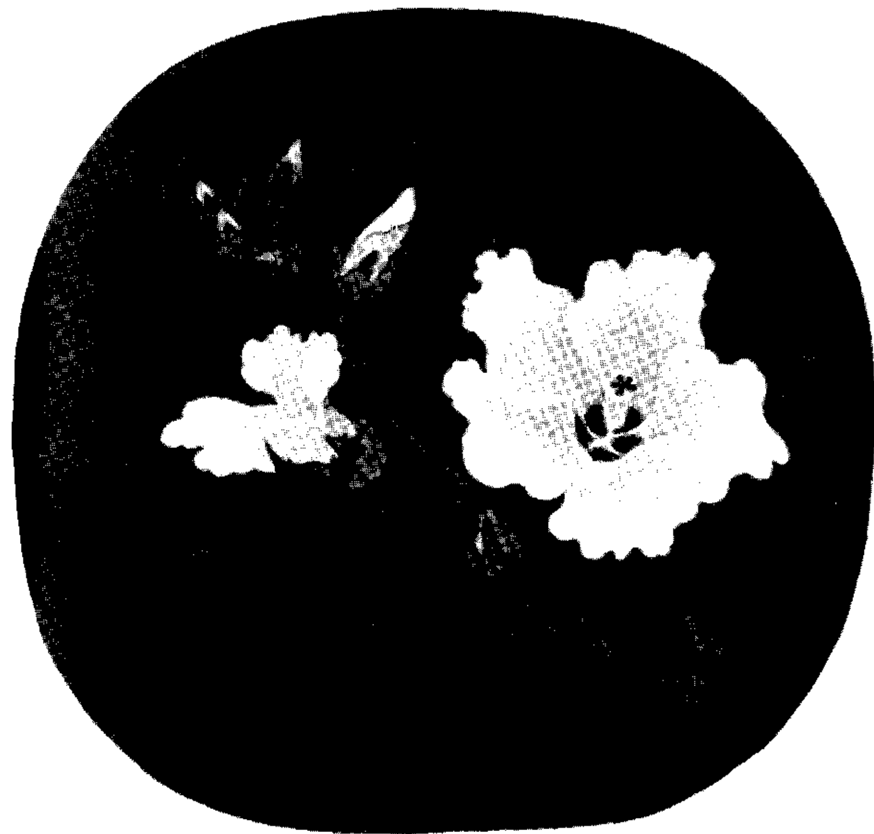
20. KUO HSI, *Trees and Steep Rocks.* Beijing Palace Museum.



21. LIANG K'AI, *Birds with a Willow Branch.* Beijing Palace Museum.

22. ANONYMOUS, *Returning with the Breeze.* Beijing Palace Museum.

23. MA YUAN, *Beneath the Pine*. Beijing Palace Museum.



24. ANONYMOUS, *Flower*. Shanghai Museum.

25. WU BING, *Bamboo and Bird.* Beijing Palace Museum.

26. ANONYMOUS, *Crab and Lotus Leaf.* Beijing Palace Museum.

27. PA-TA SHAN-JEN, *Fish and Duck.* C. A. Drenowatz Collection, Zurich.

T'ANG I-FEN

The ink, "exploded," gives birth to an infinite flavor; the color, applied clear, engenders the no-mark. We may strive to vary the colors in order to break the monotony, but do we know that a single color can be infinitely changing? This single color by itself makes it possible to distinguish yin from yang. And how much more superior is the ineffable beauty of the state without color! . . . Among the six types of ink, the white and the black delimit the bright and dark in a landscape, the dry and the wet suggest the nuanced coloring and gracious freshness of a landscape, and the concentrated and the diluted emphasize distance and relief in a landscape. In a landscape painting, the luminous side of the mountains and rocks, the surface of a sloping terrain, stretches of water, vast sky, emptiness where only mists and hazes dwell—all of this can be suggested by the original color of the paper. Moreover, white is used to represent air, water, streamers of mist, bouquets of clouds, roads, the brilliance of the sun, and more. White is at one and the same time a color and emptiness; its flavor is inexhaustible.

WANG YU

In order to achieve a wondrous effect, one must play on the ink in such a way that where the brush stops "something else" suddenly emerges.

Mountain-Water

In Chinese, the expression *mountain-water* means, by extension, the landscape, and so landscape painting is called *mountain and water painting.* (Starting with this section, landscape painting will be the essential object of our study.) Mountain-water is a synecdoche, in which a repre-

sentative part stands for the whole. Mountain and water constitute, in the eyes of the Chinese, the two poles of nature, and they are charged with rich meaning.

In a celebrated passage, Confucius writes, "The man of heart is charmed by the mountain; the man of spirit delights in water."[40] The two poles of the universe correspond to the two poles of human sensibility. As we know, the Chinese love to establish correspondences between the virtues of the things of nature and human virtues. For example, the status of *chün-tzu* (superior man) is accorded to orchids, bamboo, pines, and plum trees because of their respective virtues of grace, rigor, youth, and noble beauty. This is not a mere matter of naturalistic symbolism, for these correspondences aim at the communion through which man inverts the perspective of naturalistic symbolism by interiorizing the external world.[41] The external world is not only "out there"; it is seen from the inside and becomes the expression of man himself—hence the importance placed on *gestures* and *mutual relations* in painting groups of mountains, trees, or rocks. In this context, to paint mountain and water is to paint the portrait of man—not so much his physical portrait (although this aspect is not absent) but more that of his mind and spirit: his rhythm, his gait and bearing, his torments, his contradictions, his fears, his peaceful or exuberant joy, his secret desires, his dream of the infinite, and so forth. Mountain and water should not be taken for mere terms of comparison or pure metaphors; they embody the fundamental laws of the macrocosmic universe, which has organic links with the microcosm that is man.[42]

The profound significance of mountain-water arises from this vitalistic conception. Through the richness of their content and through their relationship of contrast and complementarity, mountain and water become the

principal figures in the universal process of transformation. This idea of transformation is based on the conviction that, in spite of the apparent contradiction between the two entities, they have a relationship of reciprocal becoming. Each one of them is perceived as a state that is constantly attracted and complemented by the other. Just like yang, which contains yin, and yin, which contains yang, mountain, which is characterized by yang, is virtually water, and water, characterized by yin, is virtually mountain.

SHIH-T'AO (OCEANS AND WAVES)

> The sea possesses a vast onrushing; the mountain possesses a latent harboring. The sea engulfs and vomits; the mountain prostrates and bows. The sea can manifest a soul; the mountain can be the bearer of a rhythm. The mountain, with its superimposition of peaks, its succession of precipices, its secret valleys and its deep abysses, its lofty crags bluntly pointing, its vapors, its mists and dews, its hazes and clouds, makes us think of the onrushing, the engulfing, the surging of the sea. But all of that is not the soul that the sea itself manifests. These are only the qualities of the sea that the mountain appropriates.
>
> The sea can also appropriate the character of the mountain. The vastness of the sea—its depths, its wild laughter, its mirages, its leaping whales and towering dragons, its tides in successive waves like peaks—all this is the way the sea appropriates the qualities of the mountain and not the mountain those of the sea. Such are the qualities that sea and mountain appropriate for themselves, and man has eyes to see this. . . . But he who only grasps the sea at the expense of the mountain or the mountain only at the expense of the sea—in truth such a person has but dull perception! But me, I see it! The mountain is the sea and the sea is the mountain. Mountain and sea know the truth of my perception:

> Everything is in man, in just the free energy of the brush, in just the ink!

This process of reciprocal becoming evokes the circular movement that Shih-t'ao calls *chou-liu* (universal flowing) and *huan pao* (universal embracing):

> Nothing less is necessary than to have recourse to mountain in order to see the breadth of the world. Nothing less is necessary than to have recourse to water to see the immensity of the world. It is necessary for mountain to work on water in order for the universal flow to be revealed. It is necessary for water to work on mountain in order for the universal embracing to be revealed. If this reciprocal action of mountain and water is not expressed, nothing can explain this universal flowing and this universal embracing. Without these, the discipline and life [of the ink and the brush] cannot find their field of action. But once discipline and life are exercised, the universal flowing and the universal embracing find their cause, and once they find their cause, the mission of the landscape is perfectly fulfilled.

What must be done for this circular movement between mountain and water to become operative within a picture? Through its introduction in the form of free space, mists and clouds, or even just fine strokes and diluted ink, emptiness breaks the static opposition between the two entities and, through the breath it generates, arouses inner transformation. As I have said, the clouds, in particular, have the capacity to create the impression of dynamic attraction that makes the mountain seem to reach toward the water and the water reach toward the mountain. Mi Fu writes, "The clouds are the recapitulation of the landscape, for in their ungraspable emptiness, one sees the many features of

mountains and the many methods of water that are concealed in them."

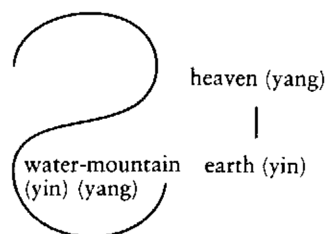
It is in this relationship of mountain and water animated by emptiness that we find a basic governing notion of both painting and geomancy *(feng-shui): lung-mai* (dragon arteries). This in turn brings into play two other binomials: *k'ai-ho* (opening-closure), or contrasting organization of space, and *ch'i-fu* (rising-falling), or rhythmic sequence of landscape. The image of dragon arteries once again evokes the sense of a dynamic landscape moved by vital breaths whose rhythmic undulation reveals, more than what is manifest, the hidden and the virtual. A painting is not alive if the painter has failed to master its *k'ai-ho* and its *ch'i-fu*.

That which is true for the relationship between mountain and water is also true for the relationships existing among the other elements of nature, particularly between trees and rocks and between animals and plants. In each case, it is by means of emptiness that the painter makes one feel the pulsations of the invisible in which all things are soaked.

Man-Heaven

We have just seen how emptiness acts within the heart of a landscape through the mountain-water pair. Broadening our gaze, we are going to observe the relationship between all of the painted elements and the space that surrounds them and carries them. This relationship between the fullnesses (the painted elements) and the emptinesses (the surrounding space) implies another essential relationship: that of heaven and earth. If mountain and water represent the two terrestrial poles, earth, in its turn as a living unit, stands in relationship to heaven. There thus exists a play

of contrasts in several stages, a play of yin and yang. In general, a yang nature is attributed to the mountain and a yin nature to the water. The mountain-water (yang-yin) pair forms the earth, which itself is yin in nature and stands in relationship to heaven, which is yang in nature. It is important, then, to distinguish the levels, which constitute an organic network that can be depicted as in the accompanying illustration. (This spiral figure also has the value of suggesting the other sublevels, which may always be taken to exist within each main level.)



The play between heaven and earth is not a play of two elements but of three. At this level, man is always present, because of his privileged connection with the earth, because of the dimension of heaven that he also possesses, and especially because of the gaze that he (as the painter or onlooker) turns toward the total landscape, of which he is, at the same time, an integral part. In this ternary relationship (man-earth-heaven), several aspects share as a common factor the emptiness that assures their unity and totality: the *mental* disposition of the elements in a picture, perspective, and the inscription of a poem in an open space.

THE MENTAL DISPOSITION OF THE ELEMENTS IN A PICTURE

While the most famous of the six canons of painting proposed by Hsieh Ho is to generate and give life to the rhythmic breath, there is another that is just as important: "Place the elements to be painted with sovereign independence." This canon has to do with the internal organization of the picture; it does not preach subjective or arbitrary placement. While imposing his own perception of things, the painter must take into account the fundamental laws of external reality. The idea of this canon is that painting ought not to be content merely with reproducing the external aspect of the world; it must re-create a universe born at once from the primordial breath and the mind of the painter.

In this perspective we see again the importance of the play of fullness-emptiness. A traditional rule says, "In a picture, a third fullness, two-thirds emptiness." There is, of course, nothing rigid about this rule. The philosophical thought that lies behind it must be emphasized. Since the third of fullness actually corresponds to the earth (terrestrial elements) and the two-thirds of emptiness to heaven (celestial elements and emptiness), the harmonious proportion established between heaven and earth is the same as the one man attempts to establish in himself, since he is also endowed with the virtues of heaven-earth. The picture thus gives concrete expression to the desire of man, who, having taken the earth upon himself, reaches toward heaven in order to attain emptiness, which draws the whole into the life-giving movement of the Tao.

CHANG SHIH

> On a piece of paper of three square feet, the part [visibly] painted only occupies one third. On the rest of the paper, it seems there are no images at all; nevertheless, the images are eminently existent there. Thus, emptiness is not nothing. Emptiness is picture.

CHIANG HO

> The charm of fullness only reveals itself through emptiness. Three-tenths of the quality of a painting resides

in the appropriate placement of heaven and earth, and seven-tenths in the discontinuous presence of mists and hazes.

WU CHENG-YEN

A landscape painting must take the format into account. A small-format picture is looked at horizontally; it is suitable not to fill it up. A large-format picture is presented vertically; it is suitable to avoid having it too empty. In sum, the small format should be inhabited by emptiness, whereas the large format should be dominated by a fullness tempered by emptiness.

FAN CHIH

In painting, much is made of the notion of emptiness-fullness. It is through emptiness that fullness succeeds in manifesting its true fullness. All the same, how many misunderstandings need to be dispelled! People generally believe that it is enough to arrange to have a great deal of unpainted space in order to create emptiness. What interest does this emptiness have if it is just inert space? It is necessary that true emptiness be in some way fully inhabited by fullness. It is emptiness—in the form of hazes, mists, clouds, or invisible breaths—that carries all things, drawing them into the process of hidden change. Far from diluting space, these forms of emptiness confer on a picture the unity in which all things breathe as in an organic structure.

Emptiness is therefore not at all outside of fullness, and still less is it opposed to it. The supreme art consists in introducing emptiness into the very midst of fullness, whether we are speaking of a detail or of the overall composition. It has been said: "Every stroke of the brush must be preceded and extended by the idea [or the spirit]." In a picture activated by true emptiness, within each stroke, between the strokes, even at the heart of the densest composition, the dynamic breaths can and should circulate freely.

HUANG PIN-HUNG

Painting a picture is like playing the game of go. One tries to set up free spaces on the board. The more there are of them, the surer one is to win. In a picture these free spaces are the empty spaces. . . . In painting, much is made of emptiness, the great emptiness and the small emptiness. It was in allusion to this that the ancients said: "Space can be filled to the point that air cannot pass through it while also containing empty spaces that horses could gambol in freely."

PERSPECTIVE

Perspective is inherent in the canon: Place the elements to be painted with sovereign independence, for perspective is primarily also mental organization. It is summed up by two binomials: *li-wai* (inside-outside) and *chin-yuan* (near-far), which clearly indicate that perspective is a matter of balance and contrast. Chinese perspective is different from linear perspective, which presumes a privileged vantage point and a point of convergence. Chinese perspective is sometimes aerial, sometimes as though from horseback level. Indeed, it is a double perspective. Generally, the painter is supposed to stand on a height from which he commands an overall view of the landscape (in order to show the distance between things immersed in an atmospheric space, he uses contrasts of volume, form, and tonality); but at the same time, he seems to move across the picture, joining himself to the rhythm of a dynamic space and contemplating things from afar, from nearby, and from different sides. Mountains, for example, are often viewed simultaneously as though from a certain height and as though directly facing them, and those in the distance might appear larger than those in the foreground. In the same way, the main wall and a side wall as well as the

outside and the interior of certain habitations are shown at the same time.

Let us recall here the conception of microcosm-macrocosm. The painter seeks to create a mediumistic space in which man reconnects with the vital current. More than being an object to look at, a painting is something to live. The double perspective translates the desire of the Chinese artist to live the essence of all things in the universe and thus to fulfill himself. The great painter Kuo Hsi of the Sung period says: "There are painted landscapes that one travels across or contemplates; there are others in which one can take a stroll; and there are still others where one would like to stay or live. All these landscapes achieve the level of excellence. All the same, the ones in which one wants to live are superior to the rest." Elsewhere he says:

> Such is the desire evoked by a painting. One is tempted to take the path that winds through the bluish haze or to have a look at the reflection of the setting sun in the peaceful river. One would like to live the experience of a hermit in his retreat in the heart of the mountains or take a walk among the rocks jutting from the steep cliffs. A painting should arouse in the one who contemplates it the desire to be in it. The sense of the miraculous that it engenders transcends it.

The problem of relationship and proportion preoccupies the painter more than any other. In his *Shan-shui-fu,* Wang Wei says:

> In painting a landscape picture, the idea must precede the brush. As to proportion: The height of a mountain is ten feet; the height of a tree, one foot; the size of a horse, a tenth of a foot; the size of a man, a hundredth of a foot. Concerning perspective: Of a man in the distance, one does not see the eyes; of a tree in the distance, one does not distinguish the branches; on a distant mountain with contours soft like an eyebrow, no rock is visible; on a distant body of water, which touches the horizon of clouds, there is no wave. As to the relationship that exists among the elements: The mountain is girdled with clouds; the rocks harbor springs; pavilions and terraces are surrounded by trees; paths bear the traces of men.
>
> A rock should be seen from three sides; a road can be taken by its two ends; a tree is apprehended by its tip; a body of water is scented by the winds that blow across it. Consider atmospheric manifestations first of all. Distinguish the bright and dark, the distinct and vague. Establish the hierarchy among the figures; fix their attitudes, their gait and bearing, their reciprocal greetings. Too many elements brings the danger of encumbrance; too few brings that of slackness. Therefore, grasp the exact measure and the right distance. Let there be some emptiness between the distant and the near. This applies to the mountains as well as the watercourses.

Later on, tradition distinguished three "distances" that pertain to perspective (see the illustration on page 94).

1. *Shen-yuan* (deep distance): This is by far the one most often employed. The spectator is supposed to be on a height with a plunging and panoramic view of the countryside. (The most typical examples are the works of Tung Yuan.)
2. *Kao-yuan* (elevated distance): This perspective is ordinarily used in a vertical picture. The onlooker, located on a relatively low level, looks up toward the heights. The horizon dominating the picture is consequently not very elevated. The onlooker's

deep distance

flat distance

elevated distance

gaze follows the gradation of the heights, represented by different superimposed mountain ranges, each range constituting a horizon in itself.

3. *P'ing-yuan* (flat distance): From a nearby position, the onlooker's gaze extends to infinity with complete freedom.

In order to display a panoramic landscape in large-format pictures, each "distance" contains three internal sections, which, by contrasting among themselves, accentuate the impression of distance. In the *kao-yuan*, the elevated distance, the superimposed mountain ranges are generally three in number. In the *shen-yuan*, the deep distance, the picture is often occupied by three groups of mountains that stretch further and further away. Thus, the three sections that compose each distance are separated by empty spaces in such a way that the onlooker, invited to penetrate mentally into the picture, has the impression of making a leap each time from one section to the other. This is a qualitative leap, because the empty spaces have precisely the function of suggesting a space that is not measurable, a space born of the spirit and of dream. The movement of the onlooker across the landscape thus becomes a spiritual ramble carried by the vital current of the Tao.

If the preceding level, mountain-water, was marked by the number two, which signifies inner change, this present level, man-heaven, is marked by the number three, which simultaneously signifies multiplicity ("the three gives birth to the ten thousand existents") and unity. Indeed, the three, in triggering the near-far and far-infinite process, finally brings about the process of return: "Being great, the Way flows; flowing, it goes further; far in its going, it ends up effecting the return" (Lao-tzu, chap. 25). The movement of becoming distant in space is in fact a circular

movement that returns and that, by reversal of the perspective and the point of view, finally transforms the relationship of subject and object. The subject projects himself by degrees onto the outside, and the outside becomes the inner landscape of the subject.

INSCRIPTION OF A POEM IN THE PICTURE

This practice, inaugurated as early as the T'ang period, became a constant at the end of the Sung period. The poem inscribed in the blank space of a picture (heaven) is not just an artificially added commentary. It truly inhabits the space (there is no hiatus between the calligraphic signs and the painted elements; both are done with the same brush) by introducing into it the living dimension of time. Within a painting characterized by three-dimensional space, the poem, through its rhythm and its content (which relates a lived experience), reveals the process by which the painter's thought process arrived at the picture. By the echo that it arouses, the poem extends the picture further. This is time with its lived rhythm, which is always renewed, time which maintains the openness of space. The inscribed poem permits man, even if he is not represented as a figure in the painting, to mark his presence within heaven-earth. Thanks to the poem, the play of fullness-emptiness can reveal its profound significance, which is to foster totality beyond contradictions and transformations.

The Fifth Dimension

Through the four levels we have examined thus far (brush-ink→yin-yang→mountain-water→heaven-earth), we have

followed a spiral development, for we are dealing with a movement that simultaneously turns on itself and opens to the infinite. In the last level (man-heaven), we saw a movement toward a symbiosis of time and space, and through that, toward a symbiosis of man and the universe. Taking this into account, we have grounds to speak of a kind of fifth dimension, beyond space and time, that represents emptiness in its supreme degree. On this level, emptiness constitutes the basis of the pictorial universe, yet it also transcends this universe and carries it toward the original unity.

This unity of emptiness, as ungraspable as it may seem, is what we shall nevertheless be trying to apprehend in its materiality. The paper, which is the support of the picture, and the gesture of the onlooker, who unrolls the scroll on which the picture is painted, are particularly important in this regard. Conceive of the pure, unmarked paper as the original emptiness with which everything begins, of the first stroke as the act of separating heaven and earth, the strokes that follow and gradually give birth to all forms as the multiple metamorphoses of the first stroke, and finally, of the complete execution of the painting as the supreme degree of development by which things return to the original emptiness. This vision, during periods of high culture, governed the outlook of all Chinese artists. It is what transforms the act of painting into the act of imitating not the spectacles of creation but the very gestures of the creator.

HUA LIN

> When painting reaches the point where it is without a trace, it seems on the paper like a natural and necessary emanation of this paper that is emptiness itself.

WANG YU

> Pure emptiness—that is the supreme state toward which every artist strives. It is only when one first apprehends

> it in one's heart that one can reach it. As in Ch'an illumination, suddenly one becomes absorbed in full-blown emptiness.

CHENG HSIEH

> The picture is on the paper, certainly. There is also what is off the paper, which the invisible extends and purifies.

HUANG PIN-HUNG

> When the ancients painted, they concentrated their efforts on the space from which brush-ink was absent; that is the hardest thing of all. "Consciousness of white, capacity of black," the single way that leads to the mystery.

The return is the finished picture. Rolled up, the painting becomes a universe closed upon itself. To unroll it, each time, is to create for the participating onlooker the miracle of unraveling time, of reliving its lived and mastered rhythm. (Let us remember that in China unrolling and contemplating a masterpiece for a period of hours was an almost sacred ritual.) As the picture is unrolled, this lived time becomes spatialized, not in an abstract framework, but in a qualitative space that is all its own, that cannot be reduced to any other. What the Chinese artist strove for, above all, was to translate lived time into a living space moved by the breaths in which true life unfolded. Once again, this transformation of time-space can only take place because of emptiness. Emptiness introduces internal discontinuity into the linear and temporal development of the picture. By inverting the relationships of inside-outside, far-near, and manifest-potential, it inaugurates the reversible process of the return, which signifies reassuming responsibility for all the life recollected or dreamed that continually keeps emerging.

The ultimate vision of this art would be more musical

than pictorial. As stated in the *Book of Music:* "The way of rites and music is the very way of heaven and earth." This visual music, through its two aspects of melody and harmony, reconnects with the primordial breath from which the ineluctable rhythm of the universe emanates.

3 Technical Terms

LET US TAKE FIRST THE FOUR notions that are fundamental for all the levels.

Ch'i 氣 (vital breaths): In Chinese cosmology, the created universe arises from the primordial breath and the vital breaths that derive from it. This is why it is important in art as in life to re-create these breaths. "Bring to life the harmonic breaths," was a canon formulated by Hsieh Ho at the beginning of the sixth century that became the golden rule of Chinese painting.

Li 理 (inner principle or structure): The prime importance given to the vital breaths permits artists to go beyond any tendency they might have toward over-realistic illusionism. What is essential is less a matter of depicting the outer

aspects of the world than of seizing the inner principles that structure all things and connect them to each other.

I 意: This term is so rich in meaning that it cannot be rendered in English except by a series of words, such as *idea, desire, instinct, intention, active consciousness, accurate vision,* and the like. It relates to the mental disposition of the artist at the moment of creation; hence the adage, "The *i* should precede the brush and extend it." In the Chinese perspective, this part of man does not have the arbitrary quality of a pure subjectivity. It is only to the degree that the artist, working through the *ch'i* and *li,* has internalized the *i* (intentionality) that inhabits all things that his own *i* can truly be sovereignly independent and efficient.

Shen 神 (soul, spirit, divine essence); Artistic creation is not a mere matter of expressing a complete relationship between man and the universe. The human genius, through its action within the process of the Tao, provides the mysterious becoming that incarnates the *shen.*

Level I: Brush-Ink

Level I concerns the entirety of the work of the brush. Even the manner of handling a brush became the object of very subtle inquiries. Concerning the body of the artist, we find such terms as *shih-chou* 實肘 (full arm), *hsü-wan* 虛腕 (empty wrist), and *chih-fa* 指法 (method for the fingers). The following brush movements were distinguished: *cheng-feng* 正鋒 (frontal attack), *ts'e-feng* 側鋒 (oblique attack), *che-pi* 折筆 (against the bristles), *heng-pi* 橫筆 (bristles lying down), *an* 按 (pressing down), *t'i* 提 (lifting),

t'uo 拖 (dragging), *ts'a* 擦 (rubbing), *ch'i-fu* 起伏 (with a wavy motion), *tun-ts'o* 頓挫 (with syncopated cadence), and so forth.

Let us recall that a stroke is not a simple line. With its attack and its thrust, its thickness and fineness, it at once incarnates form, volume, tonality, and rhythm. As a living unity, each stroke must possess *ku-fa* 骨法 (bone), *ching-jou* 筋肉 (muscle and flesh), *huo-li* 活力 (force), and *shen-ch'ing* 神情 (expression). There is a great variety of types of strokes produced by the brush.

Kou-le 勾勒	delineation of the outline of an object.
Pai-miao 白描	delineation of figures with continuous and unified lines, reinforced only here and there.
Mu-ku 沒骨	pointillist or tâchiste stroke, used especially for flowers.
Kung-pi 工筆	regular and meticulous drawing in the academic style.
Kan-pi 乾筆	stroke executed with a brush only slightly soaked in ink.
Fei-pai 飛白	stroke executed rapidly with a large brush with its bristles spread, gashed with white in the middle.
Ts'un 皴	modeled strokes of a great variety (thirty can be enumerated), the two most important being the *p'i-ma* 披麻 (unraveled hemp) and the *fu* 斧 (hatchet-style).
Tien-t'ai 點苔	adding points together to bring to life a feature or a shape (rock, tree, mountain, and so forth). The points themselves must be alive and varied: "Each point is a living seed pledged to future metamorphoses."

Level 2: Dark-Bright (Yin-Yang)

This level concerns the extendable work of the ink in denoting tonalities and, thereby, distance and depth. Tradition distinguishes five nuances of the ink: *chiao* 焦 (burnt black), *nung* 濃 (concentrated), *chung* 重 (dark), *tan* 淡 (diluted), and *ch'ing* 清 (bright); or six nuances forming three pairs of contrasting qualities: *kan-shih* 乾濕 (dry-wet), *tan-nung* 淡濃 (diluted-concentrated), *pai-hei* 白黑 (white-black). Let us recall that besides ink, mineral- or vegetable-based pigments were also used in Chinese painting to heighten the effects of ink. A specific genre making use of sumptuous coloration bears the name *chin-pi* 金碧 (gold-jade).

Jan 染	gradual application of ink
Hsüan 渲	wash
Weng 滃	deeply soaked
P'o-mo 破墨	"broken ink"
P'o-mo 潑墨	"splattered ink"
Chi-mo 積墨	"superimposed inks"

Level 3: Mountain-Water

This level concerns the principal elements of a landscape, mountain and water being the two poles. It has to do with the problem of composition. Just as for a simple brushstroke, the structural entirety of a picture must be envisaged as a living body. Thus, with regard to a given landscape, Kuo Hsi of the Sung period spoke of the skeleton (rocks), arteries (watercourses), muscles (trees), respiration (clouds), etc. Let us also recall that calligraphy, the art of bringing out the architectural beauty of ideograms, accus-

tomed painters to the laws of composition. It suggested to them a whole variety of types of structures—triangular, diagonal, circular, concentric, decentered, etc. However, the basic rule is contained in the expression "two *tuan* (sections) and three *tieh* (planes)." It consists in emphasizing, by means of median emptiness, the contrast between the upper part and the lower part, the foreground and the background, with the whole being organized in terms of threefold structures.

Chu-k'e 主客 (host-guest): relationship of distance and veneration between the chief and secondary mountains.

Ch'i-shih 氣勢 lift, thrust, lines of force

Lung-mai 龍脈 (dragon arteries): a term derived from geomancy *(feng-shui)* related to the hidden configuration of a given terrain.

K'ai-ho 開合 (opening-closure): organization of space in terms of contrasts.

Ch'i-fu 起伏 (rising-falling): rhythmic sequence of landscape.

Yen-yun 烟雲 (mist-cloud): indispensable element of a landscape. The role of clouds is not simply ornamental. As forcefully asserted by Han Chuo 韓拙 of the Sung period in his *Shan-shui-ch'un ch'üan-chi* 山水純全集, "The cloud is the synthesis of mountains and waters." Formed of water vapor and having the form of mountains, clouds and mist give the impression in a picture of drawing the two entities, mountain and water, into a dynamic process of reciprocal becoming.

Hsü-shih 虛實 (empty-full)

Yin-hsien 隱顯 (invisible-visible)

Level 4: Man-Heaven

This level concerns the tenary relationship of heaven-earth-man that governs the picture as a whole—what is in the picture and what goes beyond its borders, that which is seen and that which provides us with an infinite vision.

Li-wai 裏外 inside-outside, inner-outer.

Hsiang-pei 向背 front-back, facing side and back side.

Chin-yuan 近遠 near-far, finite-infinite.

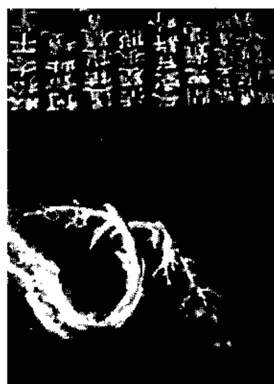
San-yuan 三遠 three types of perspective that situate the relationship between man and the universe: *kao-yuan* 高遠 (perspective toward the heights) (the onlooker is located at the bottom of the mountain and raises his gaze toward the summit and what lies beyond it), *shen-yuan* 深遠 (perspective toward the depths) (the onlooker is located on a height and enjoys both a plunging and panoramic view), *p'ing-yan* 平遠 (level perspective) (from a nearby mountain, the onlooker directs his gaze horizontally toward the distance, where the landscape extends into infinity).

Level 5: Fifth Dimension

Level 5 is the void that transcends space-time, the supreme state toward which every painting that is inspired by the truth reaches. For this ultimate level, very few descriptive terms are adequate. It is perhaps fitting to cite two expres-

sions used by the Chinese artist to gauge the value of a work and to indicate the ultimate aim of art beyond all notions of beauty: *i-ching* 意境 (density of soul) and *shen-yun* 神韻 (divine resonance).

Part Two



CHINESE PICTORIAL ART IN THE WORK OF SHIH-T'AO

1

SHIH-T'AO, A RENOWNED PAINTer of the Ch'ing dynasty, was the author of the equally renowned "Remarks on Painting," translated into French under the title *Propos sur la peinture* (I shall refer to it henceforth as *Remarks*). Though it is not rare for great painters in China to commit their thoughts about their art to writing, *Remarks* is nevertheless striking for its systematic and synthetic character. Its importance is further heightened because it was the product of a period of profound upheaval that saw the collapse of the old order. Spurred by these events, the artists of this time found themselves drawn to rethink tradition and to seek other means to express themselves. Because of his singular destiny and complex nature, Shih-t'ao was indubitably the one who reflected most intensely on the problem of art and of life. Indeed, though his career was marked by

success, he nonetheless gave expression to his torments, his regrets, and his anguished self-questioning in the numerous inscriptions in his paintings, which together constitute a document that complements *Remarks*.[44] Other facts of his life—his continual wandering, his uncertain social status, his periodic need to change his name, and so forth—tend to confirm the image of a being constantly searching, often in contradiction with himself.

Shih-t'ao, whose real name was Chu Jo-chi and whose monastic name was Tao-chi, was of imperial blood. His family descended from the elder brother of Chu Yuan-chang, the founder of the Ming dynasty. Although he was famous during his lifetime, and in spite of the numerous texts in which Shih-t'ao tells about his life, the place and date of his birth remain a matter of controversy. It is generally accepted that he was born in 1641 at Wu-chow in the province of Kuang-si in the extreme south of China.

Thanks to his relations with certain high dignitaries of the new regime who were art lovers, he was able to go to Beijing, the capital, where he stayed until 1692. In 1693, he returned to the South, to Yangchow, where he settled permanently. In full possession of his art and in demand by all, he enjoyed considerable prestige. Through his strong personality and a style that mixed refinement and extravagance, he exercised a commanding influence on his younger colleagues, the Eight Eccentrics of Yangchow.[45] He left behind a relatively large number of works.[46] His painting, while seeking to reconnect with the great tradition of the Sung and Yüan periods, opened up for future generations a new path of exploration.

2

SHIH-T'AO'S BIOGRAPHY SUGgests a being full of ambiguities and contradictions. He was a descendant of the royal family who miraculously escaped from the massacre that marked the changing of the dynasties and was subsequently obliged to pay court to the masters of the new regime. He was a wandering monk who was devoted to contemplation yet remained profoundly attracted to the world. He was a painter who was always careful to pay obeisance to the ancients but who also was the champion of a kind of extreme individualism.

Shih-t'ao bore these many contradictions rather well, but not without their stirring in him feelings of conflict and remorse. This is shown by many of the poems inscribed in his paintings. In a foreword to poems, he wrote:

> Eve of the new year, sick. A sad thought stirs me to my very guts. How could words possibly ever express all my regrets? My father and mother begat this body sixty years ago. But who am I? A man? A woman? I cry out as I did at the time of my birth. They [my parents] found joy back then in what I was. Neither an herb nor a plant, I was still unable to utter a single word of response to them. And now could this beating heart and circulating blood ever answer for the remorse and the shames of an entire lifetime? Oh, horror! Oh, pain! Now this sad thought can only be addressed to heaven.

Shih-t'ao suffered what can be considered a triple loss of father: the loss of his blood father, the loss of the dynasty he was linked with, and the loss of his spiritual master, whom he had to repudiate toward the end of his life by renouncing his monkhood. This may account for his lifelong need to find an identity. Shih-t'ao used successively a total of thirty pseudonyms, such as Survivor of the Old Dynasty, Old Man of Ts'ing-hsiang, Disciple of Great Purity, (monastic) Brother Bitter Gourd, and Venerable Blind Man. Some of these names reflect his state during a particular period; others reflect the profound desires that inhabited him. His official name, the one we use, Shih-t'ao, is revealing of the painter's state of being. It literally means "Wave of Stones" and seems indicative of Shih-t'ao's peculiar feeling for a world composed of elements in flux, divided between the liquid state and the solid state. In addition, his name marvelously expresses the dynamic conception of transformation that is at the root of Chinese painting.

It was, of course, in painting that Shih-t'ao sought his path to fulfillment. Going beyond the conflicts that painting, too, did not fail to provoke—worldly obligations, revolt against the ancients, and so forth—he turned to pictorial art to achieve the unity of man and the world, which can become one through the creation of the sign. As a result of his personal drama and his training, which was at once Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucianist, Shih-t'ao was able to carry his search to a very high level. His life as an artist was a continual exploration not only of technical problems but also of the mystery of artistic creation and of human destiny. The result was *Remarks*, his great work of synthesis.

3

SHIH-T'AO'S TEXT REPRESENTS a coherent system in which his philosophical and aesthetic thought, both the fruit of long practical experience, interpenetrate. His aesthetic philosophy, of course, found concrete expression in his many paintings. Though they give the impression of large variety, his paintings are also striking in their inner unity, which is reinforced by a profoundly original style. Thus, we find ourselves face to face with two equally structured wholes: on the one hand, a consciously formulated theory, and on the other, a practical discipline carried to its ultimate limit. It is paradoxical that each one of these wholes constitutes a unity so coherent and so complete in itself that commentators traditionally follow either one or the other, never thinking to bring the two together.

Seeing the route that Shih-t'ao followed, one feels that

it was his secret intention that practice and theory extend and transcend each other. They should not be seen as parallel entities, each enclosed in its own stable harmony. They continually invoke each other, forming two dynamic poles of a universe that has no other unity than the precarious unity of the painter's being. To attempt to pierce a hole in this universe-in-becoming of Shih-t'ao is therefore a worthy effort for a semiologist.

Given the present state of our knowledge, it is more or less impossible to grasp precisely the process by which Shih-t'ao arrived at his theory.[47] But we can point out certain of his pictures that confirm certain of his remarks, and we can let the painter's words be heard in the presence of his works. Doing this will show the internal and structural relations among the various notions that lie at the root of his theory.

Remarks was formulated in a particular cultural context and its explicit content refers to a whole array of implicit factors. Without any knowledge of this implicit aspect, the reader might appreciate the richness of one or another particular passage but would not always grasp the internal logic that connects them. After an overall reading of the text, I shall pursue the painter's thought in its intimate development, without seeking to systematize it.

Just as in Chinese painting—where through the play of fullness and emptiness, the finite figures of a picture are finite only through their opening to the infinite, and where every circular movement, in completing itself, immediately inaugurates another—my remarks can only catch up with those of Shih-t'ao by means of a spiral-shaped pursuit. These remarks—some apt and to the point and some even remarkably beside the point—might help us penetrate to the point to which the painter, consciously or not, wanted to bring us.

4

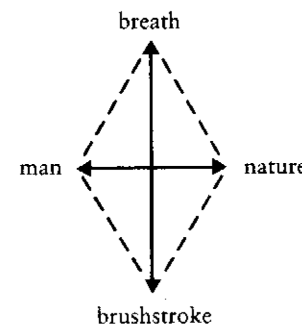
LET US ATTEMPT TO PENETRATE the pictorial universe of Shih-t'ao, without worrying about distinguishing what is traditionally recognized as beautiful or representative or about following any chronological order. Let us turn to a few pictures that seem particularly telltale.

In plates 5–10 the reader will note forms of mountains and water that are like projections of a world of sexual phantasms, such as shapes of breasts and other sexual parts of the body. Prominent or discreet, abrupt or caressing, fixed or rhythmic, they embody the many aspects of nature and also of the secret instincts of man.

One essential point must nevertheless be stressed. These works are not based on some sort of naturalism, and still less are they based on an anthropomorphism, in which man would imagine in certain elements of nature living

forms that are human in character. The meeting between man and the universe here is not situated on the superficial level of external resemblance but on a much more profound level, where the vital breaths simultaneously animate both the being of the universe and the being of man. These are more than limited and frozen shapes. What the painter is intending to capture is the breaths animating all things. To accomplish this, he has recourse to the brushstroke, the essential element in Chinese painting, which through its fullness and emptiness and its concentratedness and dilutedness, simultaneously embodies line and volume, rhythm and touch, concrete forms and dream forms. In reality, it is through brushstrokes that the sensible or sensual shapes that we noted in Shih-t'ao's paintings first took form. Thick or fine strokes, blunt or tender ones, dry strokes or strokes made with splotches of ink, controlled strokes or unbridled strokes—all so many gestures unifying the desires of man and the movements of the universe.

This intersecting relationship between nature-man and breath-stroke can be suggested by the accompanying fig-



ure. With this figure, necessarily schematic, I wish mainly to show the importance of the stroke, which, linked with the breath, implies a philosophy of life and a specific conception of the sign.

5

THE IDEA OF BREATH IS AT THE core of Chinese cosmology. The primordial breath brings forth the initial unity, referred to as the one, from the chaos that precedes heaven-earth. The one engenders the two, which represents the two vital breaths, yin and yang. From the combined and alternating action of yin and yang, the ten thousand existents are born. Every living thing is primarily conceived not as a mere substance but as a condensation of the different types of breaths that regulate its vital functioning.

In a perfect analogy, Shih-t'ao translates these cosmological notions into pictorial terms. In chapter 10 of *Remarks,* he uses the term *hun-tun* (chaos) to designate the virtual state that precedes the act of painting. Elsewhere, particularly in chapter 7, the idea of original chaos is linked to the idea of *yin-yun* (the indistinct), which also

suggests the indistinct state in which yin and yang are potentially present. It is precisely in connection with *hun-tun* and *yin-yun* that Shih-t'ao presents his conception of the *one brushstroke.* This one stroke, which corresponds to the One, brings forth from *yin-yun* the initial unity. From this arises the idea that the act of executing the first stroke becomes once again the act of separating heaven and earth. By this act, man creates himself as man by assimilating the essence of the universe. The union of brush and ink resulting from the stroke is analogous to the union of yin and yang. In the same way that the interaction of yin and yang engenders all existents and foreshadows all their transformations, the one brushstroke, through the play of brush and ink, implies all the other strokes, perceived as the transformations of the initial stroke, that gradually actualize the shapes of external reality.

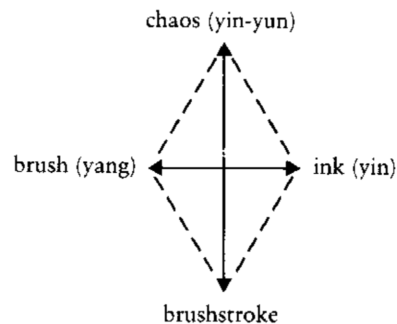
> YIN–YUN
>
> The union of the brush and the ink is that of *yin* and *yun*. The indistinct fusion of *yin* and *yun* constitutes the original chaos. If it were not by the one brushstroke, how could one ever tame the original chaos? . . . In the midst of the ocean of ink, firmly establish the spirit; at the point of the brush, let life affirm itself and come forth! On the surface of the painting, set transformation in motion; at the heart of chaos light is established and bursts forth! . . . Starting from the one, the many are divided; starting from the many, the one is conquered. The metamorphosis of the one produces yin and yun, and with that all the potentialities of the world are accomplished. [*Remarks,* chap. 7]

According to this, the art of painting is not a mere description of the spectacle of creation; it is itself creation, a microcosm whose essence and function are identical with

that of the macrocosm. Chang Tsao of the T'ang period was the author of the well-known adage: "On the outside I capture the mode of the creation; within, I grasp the source of my soul." Shih-t'ao spoke in a similar vein.

> Brush and Ink
>
> In impregnating the brush, the ink endows it with a soul; in making use of the ink, the brush endows it with spirit. . . . Man possesses the power of formation and of life. If it were not so, how could it ever be possible to draw from brush and ink a reality having flesh and bone? [*Remarks*, chap. 5]

These ideas can be expressed by the accompanying figure.



Shih-t'ao returns more than once to the theme of original chaos, which he suggests through *waves of stones* (we may recall that this expression is the translation of the painter's own name) as in plates 3 and 4. In the midst of these rocks, which are caught up in a dynamic, whirling movement, a movement incarnated by angular and twisting strokes, there is, nevertheless, a human presence represented by the hut and the hermit. These latter are depicted with straight strokes, which primarily signify the order and unity that dwell in the spirit of man. But this order and

unity are not detached from the chaos or in opposition to it. In the spirit of a Taoist or Ch'an adept, Shih-t'ao expresses in plate 3 the happiness of nonseparation experienced by man in the bosom of chaos; in plate 4, he expresses the consciousness of man as the "illuminated eye" of nature; and in plate 14, he conveys the irrepressible nostalgia of a return to the origin. (One might compare these pictures to plate 20 by Kuo Hsi.)

6

THE BRUSHSTROKE IS NOT A mere line or a mere delineation of the outline of things. Developed in the art of calligraphy, it has many implications. Through its thickness and fineness and the emptiness that it delimits, it represents form and volume. Through its attack and thrust, it expresses rhythm and movement. Through the play of ink, it suggests shadow and light. Finally, by the fact that it is executed instantaneously and without retouching, it introduces the vital breaths. The stroke seeks to capture more than external resemblance. It seeks to capture *li*, the inner lines of things. At the same time, it relates to and takes on the irresistible instincts of man. Transcending the conflict between drawn line and color, between representations of volume and of movement, by its very simplicity, the stroke

incarnates both the many and the one and also the law of transformation.

If, beginning with the fourth century, Chinese painting became an art of the brushstroke, it was because the brushstroke is profoundly in harmony with the Chinese conception of the universe. With the certainty that in nature the current of the Tao pervades the hills, rocks, trees, and rivers, and that dragon arteries wind through the landscape, the painter, in depicting the forms of outer reality, takes care to re-create the invisible and rhythmic lines that bind them together and animate them. In doing this, he gives free rein to the influxes animating his own being.

Although the idea of the one brushstroke was put forward repeatedly by other theoreticians of Chinese art, it was never affirmed with such force as by Shih-t'ao.

THE ONE BRUSHSTROKE

> The one brushstroke is the origin of all things, the root of all phenomena. Its function is manifest to the spirit and hidden within man, but the vulgar are ignorant of it. . . .
>
> The art of painting emanates from the intellect. Whether it is the beauty of mountains, rivers, human figures, and things; the essence and character of birds, animals, plants, and trees; or the measurements and proportions of ponds, pavilions, buildings, and esplanades; one will never be able to penetrate the reasons or exhaust the varied appearances if one does not ultimately possess the vast measure that is the one brushstroke. As far as you may walk, as high as you may climb, you have to start with a single step. The one brushstroke embraces everything, as far as even the most inaccessible distance. Out of ten billion movements of the brush, there is not one whose beginning and end does not reside in this one brushstroke, the

control of which rests nowhere but with man. By means of the one brushstroke, man is able to re-create a greater entity in miniature without losing a bit of it. If only his mind first forms a clear vision of them, the brush will go to the root of things. . . .

If [in the execution of a stroke] one does not paint with a free wrist, mistakes in the painting will ensue, and these mistakes will in turn cause the wrist to lose its inspired ease. Curves of the brush should be carried off in one movement; smoothness should be born of circular movements, while at the same time leaving space its role. The ends of brush movements should be decisive and the initial attacks incisive. One must be equally skillful with the circular and the angular forms, as well as with those that are straight, curved, rising, and falling. The brush moves to the left, to the right, creates reliefs and hollows, is brusque and resolute. It interrupts its movement abruptly; it lies down obliquely. Sometimes it plunges like water into the depths; sometimes it rushes upward like a flame. It does all that naturally, without the least bit of force.

Let spirit be present everywhere . . . and the most varied appearances can be expressed. Abandoning oneself to the hand's own will, one will with a gesture be able to grasp the external form as well as the inner energy of mountains and rivers, human figures and inanimate objects, birds and animals, plants and trees, ponds and pavilions, buildings and esplanades. One will be able to paint them from nature or plumb their meaning, to express their character or reproduce their atmosphere, to reveal them in their totality or suggest them elliptically. Even though no man could grasp this accomplishment, such painting will correspond to the requirements of the spirit. For the supreme simplicity has been differentiated, and the model of the one brushstroke has been established. Once this model is established, the countless creatures manifest themselves. That is why it has been said: "My way is the way of the unity that embraces the universal." [*Remarks*, chap. 1]

Landscape

If the one brushstroke is used as the measure, then it becomes possible to participate in the transformations of the universe, to fathom the forms of mountains and rivers, to measure the vast distances of the earth, to gauge the arrangement of peaks, to decipher the dark secrets of clouds and mists. Whether one takes up a stance looking straight out over a thousand leagues or one glances obliquely at a succession of peaks, one must always come back to the fundamental measure of heaven and earth. It is through the measure of heaven that the soul of the landscape can vary; it is in function of the measure of earth that the organic breath of the landscape can express itself. I am in possession of the one brushstroke, and that is why I can encompass the form and spirit of the landscape. [*Remarks*, chap. 8]

The Ripple Method

By means of ripples,[48] the brush suggests the living relief of things. But since the forms of mountains can take on a thousand varied appearances, it follows that this expression of their relief cannot be reduced to a single formula. . . .

As for the ripples of a landscape presented in its concreteness, it is necessary to refer to various mountain sites, each of which has its own identity, its peculiar structure, its natural relief. Their forms are irreducible, and it is in function of these differences that the various types of ripples are formed. Thus, we may speak of ripples as *scrolled clouds, axe-trimmed, scattered hemp, unraveled rope, skeleton's skull, devil's face, tangled faggot, sesame seeds, gold and jade, fragment of jade, round hollow, alum stone,* or *boneless*. These are the

various types of ripples. These various types should be formed on the basis of the various structures and the natural relief of mountains. There is an adaptation between thus-and-such a mountain and thus-and-such a ripple, because the ripple comes from the mountain. The mountain has its own function, and the function of the ripples is precisely to allow the mountain the freedom of expressing itself plastically.

One has to possess the mountain in order to create it, but one must possess the ripples to be able to express this creation plastically. The capacity to create a mountain depends on the ripples as a means of expression. . . .

But in the moment of manipulating the brush and ink, one should not cling to preconceived categories of mountains and ripples. The first movement of the brush attacks the paper, and all the others follow of themselves. From the moment one has grasped the one principle, the multitude of particular principles will be deduced automatically. One should examine the entire range and scope of the one brushstroke. The infinity of principles is included within it. [*Remarks,* chap. 9]

FORESTS AND TREES

When the ancients painted trees, they represented them in groups of three, five, or ten. They depicted them in all their aspects, each according to its own character, mixing together their irregular silhouettes in an ensemble that was alive to the greatest degree. My method of painting pines, cedars, old acacias, and old junipers is to group them, for example, by threes or fives, combining their attitudes. Some hold themselves straight with heroic and warriorlike energy, others bow their heads, and others raise theirs. Some are gathered upon themselves, others are erect, curving, or balanced.

Firm or pliant, the work of the brush and the wrist must follow the same method in painting rocks. Whether one holds the brush in four, five, or three fingers, all must be subordinated to the circular movements of the wrist, which itself advances or retreats at the behest of the forearm, the whole being coordinated as a unison by a single, identical force. Contrariwise, in places where the movement of the brush presses most heavily, one must fly with lifted hand above the paper, eliminating all violence. Thus, in the dense parts and in the flowing parts, everything will be equally immaterial and animated, empty and miraculous. [*Remarks,* chap. 12]

The one brushstroke is, at once, one and many. Plates 11, 12, and 13 show us the varied qualities of the strokes used by Shih-t'ao. In plate 11, one cannot overlook the contrast between the rigor of the strokes representing the stems and leaves of bamboo and the grace of those depicting the long leaves of the orchids. The rocks are rendered with a series of modeled strokes, which, by opposing one another, create volume and depth with astonishing economy. What should be stressed is the sensual impression given by these strokes and the shapes they form. Here sinuous and delicate, here heavy and dense, they are so many caresses through which the artist imprints the nuances of his sensations on the forms.

This sensuality in the strokes can also be seen in plate 12, where the strokes in the calligraphy extend the painting strokes in accentuating the mysterious flavor of *yin,* the feminine. The inscription cites a verse of Po Chü-i: "The beauty of her face is partly hidden by the zither she is holding in her arms." Thus, in the painted part, the painter re-creates a scene charged with unconfessed desires by painting flower buds that *show* and leaves that *conceal.*

Plate 13 shows us the painter giving free rein to his representational gestures. In a surge of expression at once ordered and tumultuous, we find a tangle of brushstrokes,

some unbridled, some of great finesse. This picture represents the branches of a plum tree in flower. The plum tree, to which Shih-t'ao devoted a constant passion, became his symbol, his emblem.[49] (Apropos of brushstrokes and the representation of objects, it is interesting to compare the pictures of Shih-t'ao to those of the masters of the Sung and Yüan periods. See plates 24, 25, and 26.)

7

It is through the strokes born of the play of brush-ink that the painter expresses the multiple appearances of the world. The notion of brush-ink, which is linked with yin-yang, entails on the concrete level the notion of mountain-water. Mountain-water, which represents the two poles of nature, symbolizes the laws of complementarity and transformation. It should be pointed out that, in its connection with mountain-water, brush-ink is not conceived as merely a means of expression. As we have said, it is an integral part of an organic whole, in which the human act of painting is linked with the demiurgic action of the universe in the process of becoming. Thus, following in the footsteps of others, Shih-t'ao establishes a correspondence between brush and mountain and between ink and water, using the expressions "the mountain of the brush" and the

"ocean of ink." Just as the initial stroke emerging from yin-yun is identified with the primordial breath emerging from chaos, the brush-ink is identified with yin-yang and with mountain-water (which is the material and visible manifestation of the action of yin-yang).

Taking account of all the notions under consideration up to this point, it is possible to establish the existence of organic connections between cosmology and painting in accordance with the following diagram:

chaos/yin-yun ⟶ breath/brushstroke ⟨ yang/mountain/brush ↕ yin/water/ink

TRANSFORMATION

Painting expresses the great model of the transformations of the world, the essential beauty of mountains and rivers in their form and energy, the perpetual activity of the creator, the influx of the breaths of yin-yang. Through the intermediary of the brush and the ink, it captures all the creatures of the universe, and sings its gaiety within me. [*Remarks,* chap. 3]

IN UNION WITH CALLIGRAPHY

From time immemorial, the great painters have precisely understood the following: It is necessary to paint in such a way that the ocean of ink encompasses and carries and that the mountain of the brush rises up and dominates. After that, it is necessary to extend their usage broadly, to the point of expressing the eight directions, the varied appearances of the nine districts of the Earth, the majesty of the five mountains, and the vastness of the four seas, developing to the point of including the infinitely large and diminishing to the point of picking up the infinitely small. [*Remarks,* chap. 17]

OCEANS AND WAVES

The sea possesses vast unleashing; the mountain possesses latent harboring. The sea engulfs and vomits; the

mountain prostrates and bows. The sea can manifest a soul; the mountain can be the bearer of a rhythm. The mountain, with its superimposition of peaks, its succession of precipices, its secret valleys and its deep abysses, its lofty crags bluntly pointing, its vapors, its mists and dews, its hazes and clouds, makes us think of the unleashing, the engulfing, the surging of the sea. But all of that is not the soul that the sea itself manifests. These are only the qualities of the sea that the mountain appropriates.

The sea can also appropriate the character of the mountain. The vastness of the sea—its depths, its wild laughter, its mirages, its leaping whales and towering dragons, its tides in successive waves like peaks—all this is the way the sea appropriates the qualities of the mountain and not the mountain those of the sea. Such are the qualities that sea and mountain appropriate for themselves, and man has eyes to see this.... But he who only grasps the sea at the expense of the mountain or the mountain only at the expense of the sea—in truth such a person has but dull perception! But me, I see! The mountain is the sea and the sea is the mountain. Mountain and sea know the truth of my perception: Everything is in man, in just the free energy of the brush, in just the ink! [Remarks, chap. 13]

This theme of internal contrast and reciprocal becoming implied by mountain-water is illustrated by almost all of Shih-t'ao's landscape paintings. We will content ourselves with looking at this in plates 16 and 17. In plate 16, the constituent elements—mountain, spring, rocks, houses, trees, plants—each have their own form and substance. Each, in its consciousness of being a particular existent, participates in the harmony of the whole. It is a dynamic harmony, for the emptiness that circulates not only among the elements but also within each element induces an invis-

ible flow that draws the whole into a vivifying movement of transformation. In this way, this totalizing emptiness, far from making the composition lax, contributes to the density of the picture, conveying at the same time a sense of poignant unrest and of profound acquiescence on the part of man as he participates in the impulses of nature. Plate 17 is dominated by a central emptiness, expressed by the waterfall. This provokes a sense of explosion, creating a centrifugal movement. Caught up in this movement, the mountains and the rocks composing the picture follow a circular order. The summit of the mountain seems to melt into cascades and then reemerge as waves of rocks.

In this powerful rotation, a contemplative man, as minuscule as he is, is the single stable element. He in whose heart emptiness dwells here becomes the pivot of the universal process of change. (Plates 21, 22, and 23, each in its own way, illustrate the ternary relationship man-water-mountain or man-earth-heaven ruled by emptiness. See also plate 19 by Chü-Jan, which is a superb example of vertical composition.)

8

The interaction between mountain and water is perceived in China as the embodiment of the universal process of transformation. But this interaction also involves the laws that govern human life. Indeed, in participating in the universal process of transformation, man finds the path to his own fulfillment. In this connection, it might be helpful to point out the correspondences that Chinese philosophers set up between the profound nature of mountain-water and human sensibility.

According to Confucius, "The man of heart is charmed by the mountain; the man of spirit delights in water." From this primordial affirmation was born a very specific conception of the relationship between man and nature. Nature is not envisaged as a mere external framework or a term of comparison; it holds out to man a fraternal

mirror, permitting him to discover and to go beyond himself. This is not a superficial or artificial relationship. Generation after generation, particularly in the arts, the Chinese have attempted to establish the correspondence between man and nature in terms of *virtues*. Man possesses the same virtues with which mountain and water are imbued. In this respect, we may speak of a kind of symbolization that became general in China. External forms became the representation of an inner world.

In painting, all through the great period of symbol creation (between the fifth and twelfth centuries), the slow assimilation of natural forms was not aimed at establishing academic conventions. It was based on a cosmological conception and reached toward an ideal of the human spirit: to live nature to its completion and to interiorize it by means of the domesticated breaths we call signs. The creation—both of the universe and of man—only attains its supreme state through that through which it began: a stroke. If the art of painting is considered sacred in China, if it reaches toward nothing less than a spiritualization of the universe, this is because it is based on a veritable religion of the sign.

Here we come back to something that was said earlier. In China, landscape painting was not a naturalist art in which man's presence was reduced or from which he was absent altogether; nor was it an animist art through which man sought to anthropomorphize the external forms of landscape. This art was also not content with merely recording the beauty of certain places that man could contemplate at leisure. That man is not represented in a painting as an actual figure does not mean that he is not there. He is eminently present in the features of nature, which as he experiences or dreams them are nothing other than the

projection of his own deeper nature, which is completely pervaded by an inner vision.

The belief in a correspondence of this sort was inspired by Taoism. The valley harbors the mystery of a woman's body, and rocks speak with the tormented expressions of a man. To paint a landscape is to do the portrait of man. Not the portrait of an isolated person, cut off from everything, but of a being tied into the fundamental movements of the universe. That which is expressed is man's way of being, his attitudes, his bearing, his rhythm, his spirit. The contrasts and interactions between the elements visible in the picture are man's own states: his horrors, his ecstasies, his flights of energy, his contradictions, his realized or unsatisfied desires. In the representation of a group of mountains, of rocks, or of trees, the Chinese art of painting emphasizes the *moral* relationship among the mountains—each one of which embodies an attitude and personal gestures—a relationship of veneration or hostility, harmony or tension. The onlooker apprehends this relationship in somewhat the same way a Western eye might, for example, grasp the relationship that orders the figures in a fresco by Piero della Francesca.

Classical Western painting is dominated by the human figure, which in the eyes of the painter is sufficient to embody all the beauties of the world. But the Chinese painter, beginning with the ninth and tenth centuries, gives pride of place to the landscape, which, while revealing the mysteries of nature, also appears to him to be able to express the dreams and deeper qualities of man.[50]

The theme of qualitative correspondences between man and nature was treated by Shih-t'ao in a particularly eloquent passage.

> TAKING ON ITS QUALITIES
> In the mountain, the qualities of heaven boundlessly reveal themselves: the dignity through which the moun-

tain acquires its mass, the spirit by which it manifests its soul, the creativity by which it brings about its changing mirages, the virtue that is its discipline, the movement that animates its contrasting lines, the silence that it harbors within itself, the etiquette that expresses itself in its curves and slopes, the harmony that it achieves through its turnings and windings, the prudent reserve it encloses in its coves, the wisdom it reveals in its vivid emptiness, the refinement manifested in its pure grace, the gallantry it expresses in its folds and promontories, the boldness it shows in its terrifying drops, the elevation by which it proudly dominates, the vastness it reveals in its massive chaos, the smallness it discloses in its lesser approaches. The mountain only makes all these qualities manifest in virtue of having been invested with this function by heaven. It is not invested with these gifts for the sake of enriching heaven.

In the same way, man makes manifest the qualities that heaven has invested him with, and these qualities are his own; they are not those with which the mountain is invested. From this one can conclude that the mountain actualizes its own quality, and this quality could never be actualized if, from the mountain, it were transferred elsewhere. Thus, the virtuous man has no need for virtue to be transferred to him from the outside in order to take delight in the mountain.

If the mountain has qualities like this, how would water not have its own qualities? Water is devoid of neither action nor qualities. Through virtue, water forms the vastness of the oceans and the extensiveness of the lakes; through rectitude, it finds the humility of descending and conformity to etiquette; through the Tao, it causes its tides ceaselessly to flow; through boldness, it traces out its definite course and opens the way for flights of impetuous energy; through regularity, it pacifies its eddies into a unified flow; through penetration, it realizes its distant plenitude and its universal reach; through kindness, it accomplishes its bright, clear welling-forth and its fresh purity; through constancy, it unfailingly turns its course back to the east. If water, whose qualities are thus manifested visibly in the waves of the ocean and the depth of lagoons, did not regulate its conduct by them, how could it enfold all the landscapes of the world and traverse the world with its arteries?

He who could only work on the basis of mountain and not of water would be as though engulfed in the middle of the ocean without knowing the shore, or he would be like the shore that is ignorant of the existence of the ocean. Thus, the intelligent man knows the bank at the same time as he lets himself be carried on the current of the water. He listens to the springs and takes delight on the water's edge. [*Remarks,* chap. 18]

9

THUS ULTIMATELY EVERYTHING comes down to man. Through the discipline of the pictorial art, man seeks his own unity while assuming responsibility for external reality, for man cannot fulfill himself without fulfilling the virtues of heaven and earth with which he is endowed. The ideal toward which Chinese painting strives is a form of totality—the totality of man and the totality of the universe, which are interdependent and are in truth one.

In his conception of man and of man's mission—a conception that is confirmed in the quotations that follow—Shih-t'ao takes his place at the highest level of Chinese philosophy. Though his thought is essentially inspired by Taoism and Ch'an Buddhism, it also includes the best elements of Confucianism. In particular, he echoed the Confucian ideas already expressed by Tung Chung-shu

("Heaven gives, earth receives and makes grow, and man fulfills") and in the *Book of the Just Mean (Chung-yung):* "Only the man who is perfectly in harmony with himself, who is perfectly sincere, can fulfill his nature. . . . To fulfill the nature of beings and things is to join as a third in the creative and transformatory action of heaven and earth."

Shih-t'ao himself writes:

> IN UNION WITH CALLIGRAPHY
>
> Heaven invests man with the model, but it cannot invest him with its fulfillment. Heaven invests man with the art of painting, but it cannot invest him with pictorial creativity. If man abandons the model and occupies himself solely with achieving its fulfillment, or if man neglects the principle of painting and immediately fixates on creating, then heaven is no longer in him. No matter how much calligraphy and painting he does, his work will not stand. [*Remarks,* chap. 17]
>
> BRUSH AND INK
>
> If the mountains, the rivers, and the infinity of creatures can reveal their soul to man, it is because man possesses the power of formation and of life. If not, how would it ever be possible to draw from the brush and the ink a reality that has flesh and bone, expansion and compactness, substance and function, form and dynamism, slope and perpendicularity, collectedness and leaping, secretive latency and bursting-forth, proud elevation, abrupt emergence, sharp pinnacle, fantastic declivity, and dizzy overhang, expressing in each detail the totality of its soul and the fullness of its spirit? [*Remarks,* chap. 5]

We are in the presence of a unitary conception of the universe, which nevertheless implies the inner, dialectical relationship of man and nature. Nature, in its virtuality, reveals to man his own nature, making it possible for him to go beyond himself. Man, in fulfilling himself, makes it

possible for nature to be fulfilled in its turn. As stated in the *Book of the Just Mean,* (referred to above), man cannot fulfill his nature except by fulfilling the nature of beings and things. For Shih-t'ao, the realization of this *nature (hsing)* is of course intimately bound up with the discipline of painting. Painting is the preeminent way leading to the fulfillment of everything potentially alive. For painting is more than a means of expression or a means to knowledge. It is a fundamental way of being. One of the basic ideas of the philosophy of Shih-t'ao is receptivity, for only receptivity, man's innate capacity to apprehend the essence of things, keeps human nature intact and causes it to unfold totally.

Revering Receptivity

> In regard to receptivity and knowledge, it is receptivity that comes first and knowledge that follows. Receptivity posterior to knowledge would not be real receptivity. From antiquity until the present day, the greatest spirits always used their knowledge to express their perceptions and occupied themselves with intellectualizing their perceptions in order to develop their knowledge. When such an ability proves inapplicable to a particular problem, it is because it is based on restricted receptivity and limited knowledge. Thus, it is important to broaden and develop these before trying to grasp the measure of the one brushstroke.
>
> The one brushstroke encompasses the universality of beings. The painting results from receiving the ink, the ink from receiving the brush, the brush from receiving the hand, the hand from receiving the spirit—just as in the process through which heaven begets what earth then fulfills. Everything is the fruit of receiving. Thus, the most important thing for man is to know how to be reverent. For he who is incapable of revering the gifts of his perception wastes himself completely, just as someone who has received the gift of painting but fails to re-create, reduces himself to impotence.
>
> O receptivity! In the art of painting, may it be revered and husbanded. One should put it to use with all one's might, unfailingly and unceasingly. As is said in the *Book of Changes:* "In the image of the rigorous and regular gait of the cosmos, the good man works by himself without respite." It is thus that one can truly honor receptivity. [*Remarks,* chap. 4]

But man will end up absorbing himself in this work, for in this is true going beyond, in this is participation in the perfecting of the creation.

Taking On Its Qualities

> The work does not reside in the brush, which permits it to be transmitted; it does not reside in the ink, which permits it to be perceived; it does not reside in the mountain, which permits it to express immovability; it does not reside in the water, which permits it to express movement; it does not reside in antiquity, which permits it to be unlimited; it does not reside in the present, which permits it to be without blinders. Also, if the succession of the ages is without disruption and brush and ink subsist in their permanence, it is because they are intimately penetrated by this work. In truth, this latter rests on the principle of discipline and life: By the one, master the many; starting with the many, master the one. It depends neither on mountain nor on water nor on the brush nor on ink nor on the ancients nor on the moderns nor on the saints. It is the true work, that which is founded on its own substance. [*Remarks,* chap. 28]

10

SHIH-T'AO PASSIONATELY "FATHOMED the mystery of mountain and water," and in re-creating this mystery, utterly absorbed himself in the stroke. His work is a projection of dreams and desires sprung at once from his unconscious and from a mastered rhythm, and the depths of his nature, both carnal and spiritual.

YIN-YUN

> In the midst of the ocean of ink, firmly establish the spirit; at the point of the brush, may life affirm itself and come forth! On the surface of the painting, set transformation in motion; in the heart of chaos, light is established and bursts forth! At this point, even if the brush, the ink, and the painting were done away with, the "I" would still endure, existing by itself. For it is I who express myself by means of the ink; the ink is not

> expressive by itself. It is I who paint by means of the brush; the brush does not paint by itself. It is I who give birth to my creation; it could not ever give birth to itself. [*Remarks,* chap. 7]

LANDSCAPE

> I possess the one brushstroke, and that is why I encompass the form and spirit of the landscape. Fifty years ago there hadn't yet been knowledge of my "I" with the mountains and rivers. Not that they would have been negligible assets, but I let them just exist by themselves. Now the mountains and the rivers charge me to speak for them; they are born in me and I in them. I searched unceasingly for extraordinary peaks, and I made sketches of them. Mountains and rivers met with my spirit, and their imprints underwent a transformation there, so that finally they are no different from me, Tati. [*Remarks,* chap. 8]

We still possess several self-portraits of Shih-t'ao and several poems in which he depicts himself. Of the two portraits we present here (plates 1 and 2), the first is refined and unified in execution. It shows us a man (at the age of thirty-three) of elegant carriage with a penetrating gaze, endowed with a lucid vision of himself, which is nevertheless not without a certain indulgence. The second shows him already old, with a wild, almost haggard look, which is accentuated by the dryness of the brushstrokes.

Elsewhere, his poems or the inscriptions in his paintings reveal a multifaceted personality that brings together intelligence and a lively sensibility, a tormented spirit and a kind of casual offhandedness.

> It is said that in the old days, the painter Ku K'ai-chih attained triple perfection. As for myself, I attain triple madness: mad myself, mad my language, and mad my

painting. Nevertheless, I am looking for the way to attain true madness.

I laugh in the direction of the naked brush in my hand. Suddenly, I start to dance, crying out extravagantly. At these cries, heaven opens vast. At the center of the heavenly vault, the moon shines, a radiant pearl, distant, minuscule.

Now I speak with my hand, you listen with your eyes. This is not at all given to vulgar people to understand. You think the same, don't you?

Autumn. After a long illness. A friend comes with this paper to ask me for a painting. I paint ten sheets in one go. The paper is still too new. In ten years or more, it will perhaps be worth contemplating them.

Here on this [painted] mountain, when the tiger passes, one smells the odor of flesh.

Like a furious lion clinging to a rock, or a thirst-ridden horse rushing to the spring, or a threatening storm, imminent, charged with thunderheads, here am I, outside of reality, outside the world, concentrating, liberated. . . . That which is contained in my brush—my emotions, my desires—and which flouts tradition will not fail to shrug its shoulders at the connoisseurs. The latter will exclaim, Ah, but that doesn't look like anything!

As I was painting this picture, I became the springtime river. The flowers of the river opened at my hand's whim; the waters of the river flowed with the rhythm of my being. In the lofty pavilion perched above the river, the painting in my hand, I cry out the name of Tzu-mei. Laughter is mixed with my cries. Waves and clouds suddenly arise. Unrolling the painting once again, I plunge into the vision of the divine.

Hairless and without a cap, I also have no refuge in this world to which I can flee. I become the man in the painting with a fishing pole in his hand, in the midst of the water and the reeds, there where heaven and earth, unbounded, are but one. (See plate 10.)

Tirelessly, Shih-t'ao painted nature in its most varied aspects: mountains, streams, stones, trees, vegetables and fruits, the changing lights of the seasons, and so forth. But there was one element that most haunted and obsessed him: flowers. Through flowers he expressed his desire to go back to certain mythical figures and, hence, his nostalgia for a primordial, original world. For making the elements of nature into symbols—as Chinese poetry and painting do—permits man to find a mirror of himself and at the same time to reach toward something else, toward the mystery of himself.

Among all the flowers Shih-t'ao painted (narcissus, peonies, chrysanthemums, orchids, lotuses, and more), the ones that occupy the central place in his vision are without doubt plum flowers. He returns repeatedly to these flowers, which are at once tender and passionate, delicate and hardy, and which, since they grow in the midst of snow, also symbolize purity. They seem to embody his trembling sensitivity, and more subtly, his secret sensuality. Shih-t'ao's constant questioning about his identity, even his sexuality, found an intimate echo in plum flowers. He was so identified with these flowers that he called himself the Plum Flower Hermit.

In 1685, at the age of forty-four, dazzled by the plum trees in blossom in the snowbound countryside around Nanking, Shih-t'ao painted a long scroll and composed nine poems entitled *Odes to Plum Flowers*. Charged with mythical images and personal allusions, they are difficult to translate into another language. What follows are two nearly literal translations, which keep the ambiguity of the originals.

The studio, covered with perfumed snow, opens into the mist. Without constraint or fetter, man's vision becomes free. During the second watch, at the rising of the moon, branches brush against the door. A few pearls are unveiled, and their shadows caress the front steps. Hesitating between the seat and the bed, the poem is slow in ripening. Bundled in furs and blankets, the man sinks into dream. Suddenly, the sound of a bell pierces the dawn fog. The wish to be buried at the bottom of the flowered gorge.

Vainly though the frost and snow try to chill these branches, still they bring forth their hidden desires. Gnarled trunks, raised branches polished by the years. Heart of void rejoining immemorial age. Spellbound, the man confuses rusted iron and glowing flesh. Dazzled by a thousand gems once fallen from heaven. How then repress the cries that burst forth: Man and flower share the same madness!

Shih-t'ao kept his passion for plum flowers until the end of his life. In 1706, at the age of sixty-five, he wrote:

> Fear of contemplating flowers in the mirror of others. Wandering life, thoughts reaching for infinity. What is left to desire between the dried ink and the naked brush? On the endless road, the traveler incessantly bemoans his fate. . . . When the sun goes down behind the ramparts, in the distance hunting horns are heard. How I could take the flowering plum in my arms—I who no longer possess anything but my white hair!

The last image I would like us to keep of the work of Shih-t'ao is the scene in plate 18. It is made up of spots and points, like so many flower petals opening furiously or spinning in the air, or like waves of stone carrying everything away. When a painter's stroke comes down to the

point, we touch the mystery of the temptation of the exploded line, indeed, of the nonline. The great modern painter Huang Pin-hung says of the nonline, or seed, "Each point must be a sown seed that promises continuous new unfoldings."

Let us listen, one last time, to Shih-t'ao:

> When the ancients painted tree leaves and the points that adorn them, they distinguished between dark ink and concentrated ink. They proposed as models the forms of ideograms, such as 分, 个, 一, 品, 厶; or the leaves of plane-trees, larches, willows, or pine needles; or again, falling leaves, or slanting leaves, or grouped leaves, and so forth. All that in order to re-create the tonalities and the quivering of forests and mountains.
>
> As for myself, I take a different approach. With regard to points, according to the season, I distinguish rain, snow, wind, and sun. According to circumstances, I distinguish the back, the front, yin, and yang. Points are alive and of infinite variety. There are those that are engorged with water or ink, moved by a single breath; those that are closed like a bud or that branch out as though woven of fine threads; those that are vast and empty, dry and insipid; those that hesitate between ink and nonink, "flying whites," like haze; those that give a smooth or transparent look or a burnt look like lacquer. Two points remain [the pun is the same in Chinese] unrevealed: the point without heaven or earth that falls, lightninglike, in a flash and the luminous point, invisible, charged with mystery in the midst of a thousand rocks and a thousand caves. Ah, the true model has no fixed reference point. The points are formed at the will of the breath.[51]

NOTES

1. The primacy of painting is forcefully affirmed in all the Chinese treatises. Western art historians recognize this as well. Peter Swann remarks, "The Chinese consider painting to be the only real art." And William Cohn writes, "For a long time, the Chinese have considered the pictorial art as one of the most elevated manifestations of the human creative genius, and their painting is a total expression of their conceptions of life."

2. There is still another degree that stands outside the categories: *i-p'in* (work of spontaneous genius). Here, too, it is a question of exalting the innate correspondence between man and nature.

3. These are taken for the most part from *Li-tai ming-hua chi* by Chang Yen-Yuen, *Tang-ch'ao ming-hua lu* and *Tu-hua chien-wen chih* by Kuo Jo-hsü, and *Hsüan-ho hua-p'u* and *Hua chien* by T'ang Hou.

4. *Huai-nan-tzu*, chapter 1: "The no-form is the primal ancestor of all beings just as the no-note is the forbear of resonances."

5. I have made a study of these techniques in *Chinese Poetic Writing*, trans. by Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

6. Marcel Granet, *La Pensée chinoise* (Chinese thought), p. 464:

"According to Hsün-tzu, the heart, in order to eliminate error, must keep itself empty, unified, in a state of quietude. What he means by emptiness of heart is not at all the ecstatic kind of emptiness but a state of impartiality. . . . Judgment must be applied to the whole object; it only has a value if it results from a synthetic effort of the mind."

7. This noumenon-phenomenon dichotomy, as inadequate as it might be, seems to indicate the form of Chinese thought better than the transcendence-immanence dichotomy. *Noumenon* denotes that which is of the nature of the origin, which is still undifferentiated and potential. The term *phenomenon* designates the concrete aspects of the created universe. These two are neither separate nor in simple opposition; without being on the same level, they are organically linked.

8. In China, the complete works of a great philosopher, in the absence of a specific name, is generally designated by the philosopher's own name. Thus, the works of Chuang-tzu or those of Huai-nan-tzu are respectively called *Chuang-tzu* and *Huai-nan-tzu.* The opus of Lao-tzu is known by the title *Tao-te-ching* (Book of the Way and of Virtue), but following the tradition and for the sake of convenience, I will call it *Lao-tzu.*

9. Granet, *La Pensée chinoise,* p. 232: "One is never anything other than the whole, and two is nothing other than the pair. Two is the pair characterized by the alternation of yin and yang. The one, the whole, is the pivot that is neither yin nor yang but by which the alternation between yin and yang is coordinated. It is the central square that does not count (like the hub, which the Taoist authors say is able to make the wheel turn because of its emptiness). . . . Both together, unity and pair, the whole, if we want to give it a numerical expression, is found in odd numbers, and first of all in the three (the one plus the two). Three, as we shall see, amounts to a hardly attenuated expression of unanimity."

10. The majority of these texts are parts of collections or anthologies, such as *Wang-shih shu-hua yuan* by Wang Shih-chen, *Mei-shu ts'ung-shu* by Teng Shih, *Chung-kuo hua-lun lei-pien* by Yu Chien-hua, and *Hua-lun ts'ung k'an* by Yu An-lan. Page references are given for the *Hua-lun ts'ung-k'an* (HLTK). For the texts that are not part of that, see the Bibliography.

11. HLTK, p. 1.

12. Ibid., pp. 4–6.

13. Ibid., pp. 7–10.

14. Ibid., pp. 16–30.

15. Ibid., pp. 33–50.

16. Ibid., pp. 55–57.

17. Ibid., pp. 76–104.

18. Ibid., pp. 134–140.

19. Ibid., pp. 65–68.

20. Ibid., pp. 146–158.

21. Ibid., pp. 235–256.

22. Ibid., pp. 495–507.

23. Ibid., pp. 316–321.

24. Ibid., pp. 424–432.

25. Ibid., pp. 322–394.

26. Ibid., pp. 275–309.

27. Ibid., pp. 258–261.

28. Ibid., pp. 508–528.

29. Ibid., pp. 433–466.

30. In the course of this study, emphasis will be placed on landscape painting. The reason for this is that the aesthetic theorists elaborated their philosophy primarily in relation to landscape painting. We should nevertheless note that Chinese painting works with a wide variety of thematic material, traditionally divided into four categories: landscape (which includes human habitations); human figures, plants and flowers (which are sometimes associated with birds and insects); and animals. There are numerous technical treatises dealing with each one of these categories.

31. This adjective, of English-language origin, is borrowed from Joseph Needham. See *Science and Civilization,* vol. 1.

32. In his *Ecrits et propos sur l'art* (Writings and remarks on art), p. 182, Henri Matisse speaks of the eternal conflict between drawing and color. Elsewhere, he says: "In a drawing, even when it is formed by a single stroke, one can give an infinity of nuances to each part that it encloses. . . . It is not possible to separate drawing and color. . . . The drawing is a painting done with reduced means. On a white surface, with pen and ink, one can create volumes by creating certain contrasts; by changing the quality of the paper, one can convey pliant surfaces, luminous surfaces, or hard surfaces without putting in either shadows or light."

33. This by no means excludes the possibility of the painter's painting from nature in the course of doing a picture, especially when it

comes to capturing tonal nuances in atmosphere. The same holds true for paintings of human figures or animals.

34. *Ch'i-yün sheng-tung.* I am not unaware of the many interpretations to which this canon has given rise. The canon is syntactically divided into two groupings, a nominal grouping and a verbal one. The verbal grouping, *sheng-tung*, could be translated "render living and animate." Instead of the expression "rhythmic breath," the nominal grouping, *ch'i-yün,* could be rendered by a compound in which both parts have equal status, "breath-harmony." In this acceptation, the idea of breath is particularly related to the work of the brush, whereas harmony suggests the effect of the ink.

35. See *Mei-shu ts'ung-shu.*

36. In *Ecrits et propos sur l'art,* Matisse says: "I had already noticed that in the works of Orientals the design of empty spaces left around the leaves counted as much as the design of the leaves themselves. That, with two neighboring branches, the leaves of one branch were more closely related to those of the neighboring branch than to those on the same branch." "I draw the olive tree that I see from my bed. When the inspiration has moved away from the object, I observe the empty spaces among the branches, an observation having no immediate relation with the object. In this way, one escapes from the habitual image of the drawn object, from the cliché 'olive tree.' At the same time, one identifies with the object."

37. P. Rykmans, *Les "Propos sur la peinture" de Shitao.*

38. Li Jih-hua (1565–1635) was a scholar of vast culture. He was the author of several collections in which he treats a wide variety of subjects. His remarks on painting, disseminated as part of the collections, were included in most of the anthologies and are striking for their precision and relevance.

39. In *Ecrits et propos sur l'art,* Matisse also remarks: "Color contributes toward the expression of light, not the physical phenomenon, but the only light that exists—that which is in the brain of the artist. Summoned and nourished by matter, re-created by the mind, color can translate the essence of each thing and correspond at the same time to the intensity of its emotive impact. But drawn design and color are primarily suggestion. By means of illusion, they should provoke in the onlooker a sense of the possession of things. An old Chinese proverb says: When one draws a tree, one should feel that one is being raised up correspondingly."

40. Analects of Confucius, 6.21.

41. This idea is expressed in Chinese by the word *ch'ing-ching* (feeling-landscape).

42. However, classical Chinese painting neglected the tragic aspect of human life. This aspect was taken over to a certain extent by Buddhist painting.

43. This binomial has to do with the representation of elements involving contrasts of inside and outside: mountain, rock, human habitation. With regard to this last, it is important to note that in the Chinese tradition practically no closed scenes of interiors exist. All interiors are open to the outside and a habitation is seen at the same time from the inside and from the outside.

44. These inscriptions and poems were collected and published very early (in 1730) by Wang I-ch'en under the title *Ta-ti-tze t'i-hua-shih pa.* The text of *Remarks* was also published through the efforts of Wang I-ch'en, in 1731. Among the modern collections in which the written work of Shih-t'ao is included, *Mei-shu-ts'ung-shu* is especially worth noting.

45. This is a name given to a group of painters of the eighteenth century living in Yangchow who were distinguished by their spirit of revolt against convention and their outrageous individualism.

46. It is difficult to assess the exact number of pictures by Shih-t'ao presently preserved in the world, because of the existence of many fakes. The totality of his painted work, composed of albums and of pictures of larger format, can be divided into three periods: the Hsüan-ch'eng period, the Nanking period, and the Yangchow period. In this regard, it is quite useful to consult the chronology of Shih-t'ao established by Fu Pao-shih and the catalog of the Shih-t'ao exposition organized in 1967 by the University of Michigan Museum of Art.

47. We only know that *Remarks* was written rather late, around 1700. Shih-t'ao was then approaching his sixtieth year.

48. Ripples are modeled strokes. See Part One, chapter 2.

49. See chapter 10.

50. Let us recall, however, that the painting of human figures was one of the important categories in Chinese painting. This was particularly the case in the religious tradition for the representation of buddhas and saints, gods and demons.

51. These remarks of the painter's are still better illustrated by his famous painting *Ten Thousand Splatterings* (Suchow Museum, China), whose lightninglike gestural movement prefigures modern abstract painting.

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