

Chapter 1

Approaches to Modern and Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy and Ink Painting

In contrast to extensive literature on premodern Asian art, there has been very little, if any, serious scholarly study of modern and contemporary Asian art as a whole by mainstream art historians working in Europe and North America. Moreover, introductory college texts either ignore it completely or denigrate it. For example, the legendary long-time director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, Sherman E. Lee, in his *History of Far Eastern Art* (5th edition, 1994; first published in 1964) asserts that “Rajput painting deteriorated sadly by the middle of the nineteenth century”; that “China in the nineteenth century...was not a fountainhead of great painting”; and that there was a “sad decline of Japanese art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century”).¹ *The Great Painters of China* by Max Loehr (Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Professor of Oriental Art at Harvard University, 1960–1974) concludes the story of Chinese masters with Cheng Hsieh (1693–1765);² James Cahill, who studied with Loehr and later became a prominent scholar of Chinese art twice honored by the College Art Association, similarly ends the story of Chinese painting in his popular book *Chinese Painting* with Lo P’ing (1733–1799).³

As I have pointed out,

Western misconceptions about Chinese art have a long history. During the eighteenth century, chinoiserie, a decorative style in which pseudo-Chinese motifs were mixed with those of India and Japan, was highly popular in Europe. The tendency to lump the arts of all Asian cultures together was continued even among many scholars of Asian art active in the West in the first half of the twentieth century under the strong influence of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who maintained that “Asia is One,” thereby ignoring the distinctive features of Chinese art as compared with Indian art and Japanese art. They also, perhaps

unintentionally, reinforced the centuries-old Western image of Asian art as strange and exotic. Another form of distortion of Chinese art was made by scholars such as Ernest Fenollosa, who saw Chinese art through Japanese eyes and dismissed Chinese painting since the mid-13th century as “formless and woolly” and as “the deification of the dead bones of formalism.”⁴

Yet, we know that Chinese artists have continued to make art since the eighteenth century; Fenollosa, Lee, Loehr, and Cahill simply could not escape the Western misconception of the “decline” of Chinese civilization; their inability to understand and appreciate Chinese art since the eighteenth century embodies what Walter Pater wrote in 1893 in his Preface to *The Renaissance*: “Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness.”⁵ Fenollosa, Loehr, Lee, and Cahill’s characterization and evaluation of Chinese art in general and Chinese painting in particular since the eighteenth century as insignificant and in decline simply continue the Orientalist attitude toward Chinese culture.

In the following pages, I aim, first of all, to provide some perspectives on the Chinese sense of beauty within the Chinese outlook on life and, second, through an exploration of the Chinese aesthetic category called *hsü-shih* (“emptiness and substance”) to shed some light on a more sympathetic understanding of modern Chinese calligraphy and ink painting and to restore them to their proper positions in the cultural history of modern and contemporary China.

As Freer Fellow at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington in 1978–79, every day I had to use an entrance hidden behind one of the walls of the Peacock Room (Figs. 1.1–1.2) to reach my small office. The Peacock Room was designed by James Whistler (1834–1903) as the dining room for his patron, Frederick Richards Leyland (1831–1892); it was later dismantled and the building was sold eventually to Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919). In 1923 the room was reinstalled in the Freer Gallery of Art. Seeing the Peacock Room daily gave me ample opportunity to think about the nature of beauty and art. The blue and white porcelains in the Peacock Room also evoked the “China-mania” initiated by Whistler and his contemporaries. The fact that blue and white porcelain, most of it mass-produced in Chinese factories for export and considered quite unremarkable by Chinese connoisseurs, caused such a sensation in Europe since the seventeenth century made me wonder if there is such a thing as universal beauty.

A study of young women's faces, published in the *British Journal of Psychology* in 1960, and a similar study conducted in the United States and published in *Sociology and Social Research* in 1965, seemed to indicate that "people in the same culture agree strongly about who is beautiful and who is not."⁶ Do these studies lead one to conclude that there is a universal conception of physical beauty? Charles Darwin, very much aware of the diversity of beauty, provided an answer: "If everyone were cast in the same mold, there would be no such thing as beauty."⁷ In the molds from which the mass-produced porcelains were cast we have a striking illustration of Darwin's assertion.

If we look to the origins of this manufactured aesthetic, we can see in Chinese art an embodiment of some of the most important legacies of Chinese civilization for the modern world: the importance of education and the educability of all people; a profound respect for nature; and an emphasis on human—individual and collective—good. Moreover, China has one of the longest continuous artistic traditions in the world, and that tradition has contributed to visual culture an endless stream of great masters, glorious monuments, and intriguing theories about art and beauty. Chinese civilization has also produced fascinating ideas about the pursuit of happiness.

I would like to begin with those associated with the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu, who lived in the fourth century B.C.E. The ideas of Chuang Tzu and his followers were collected in the Daoist classic *Chuang Tzu*, and they have given rise to a long tradition of skepticism, anti-traditionalism, iconoclasm, and unorthodoxy toward the pursuit of beauty and happiness. Whenever I gaze at the goldfish swimming below the Flying Rainbow Bridge in the sixteenth century Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician in Su-chou (Fig. 1.3), I am reminded of a parable from *Chuang Tzu*:

Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Chuang Tzu said, "See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!"

Hui Tzu said, "You're not a fish—how do you know what fish enjoy?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're not I, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?"

Hui Tzu said, "I'm not you, so I certainly don't know what you know. On the other hand, you're certainly not a fish—so that still proves you don't know what fish enjoy!"

Chuang Tzu said, "Let's go back to your original question, please. You asked me how I know what fish enjoy—so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao."⁸

莊子與惠子遊於濠梁之上。莊子曰：「儵魚出遊從容，是魚之樂也。」惠子曰：「子非魚，安知魚之樂？」莊子曰：「子非我，安知我不知魚之樂？」惠子曰：「我非子，固不知子矣；子固非魚也，子之不知魚之樂，全矣。」莊子曰：「請循其本。子曰『汝安知魚樂』云者，既已知吾知之而問我，我知之濠上也。」

One of the best-known passages from *Chuang Tzu* is that about the Butterfly's Dream:

Chuang Chou [Chuang Tzu] dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things.⁹

昔者莊周夢為胡蝶，栩栩然胡蝶也，自喻適志與！不知周也。俄然覺，則遽遽然周也。不知周之夢為胡蝶與，胡蝶之夢為周與？周與胡蝶，則必有分矣。此之謂物化。

Both the parable about the enjoyment of fishes and the passage about the Butterfly's Dream exemplify the Taoist belief in the subjectivity of happiness and beauty. A passage from the chapter "Discussion on Making All Things Equal" in *Chuang Tzu* further indicates the Taoist skepticism about the objectivity of beauty:

Men claim that Mao Ch'iang and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world?¹⁰

毛嬙、麗姬，人之所美也，魚見之深入，鳥見之高飛，麋鹿見之決驟。四者孰知天下之正色哉？

Chuang Tzu's skepticism about the objectivity of beauty can be seen in the popularity of a series of paintings of "beautiful women" in the Palace Museum (Figs.1.4–1.15). These were displayed at the exhibition *China: The Three Chinese Emperors, 1662–1795* at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2006 and have been among the most popular pieces in exhibitions organized for Western audiences, perhaps because they seem to exemplify the idealized life of women and the ideal of feminine beauty in China. Painted by anonymous court artists for Prince Yinchen, the future Yung-cheng Emperor, who would rule China from 1722 to 1735, these pictures reveal the persistence of many Westerners' curiosity about what lies behind the doors of the Forbidden City. Many of the pictures contain sexual innuendo; in one example (Fig. 1.6), "one woman is courted by a pair of magpies who call to her through the window; together the magpies represent a conventional sign for 'double happiness,' a symbol of the conjugal bliss of a wedded couple; but the woman sits alone waiting."¹¹ The screen, truncated by the frame, also features one hundred forms of the same Chinese character, *shou*, or "long life." Double happiness and long life are what every man and woman would like to have.

The popularity of these kinds of pictures with Western audiences is not new. Starting with the Greek myth of the luxury and decadence of Asia, through Marco Polo's account of the gorgeous "East," to the French writer Victor Segalen's literary encounter with and "re-creation" of Chinese art, the story of Westerners' changing images, perceptions, impressions, and constructions of Chinese art is a history of mutual misunderstanding and understanding between "East" and "West." One of the most telling examples is Hegel's assertion on Chinese painting in his lectures in the 1820s on the philosophy of history:

The Chinese have not yet succeeded in representing the beautiful as beautiful; for in their painting shadow and perspective are wanting . . . the Exalted, the Ideal and the Beautiful are not the domain of [the Chinese artist's] art and skill.¹²

In the writings on Chinese art by some of the most perceptive modern art historians and critics—Roger Fry, Clement Greenberg, Ernest Gombrich, and Arthur Danto—the trope of "difference" is unmistakable. Roger Fry, in particular, is an excellent example of Western critics' understanding as well as their difficulty in comprehending some unique aspects of the Chinese sense of beauty. Fry's shrewd insight can be seen in his appreciation, first published in 1919, of a ceramic bowl from the Sung dynasty:

We apprehend gradually the shape of the outside contour, the perfect sequence of the curves, and the subtle modification of a certain type of curve which it shows; we also feel the relation of the concave curves of the inside to the outside contour; we realize that the precise thickness of the walls is consistent with the particular kind of matter of which it is made, its appearance of density and resistance; and finally we recognize, perhaps, how satisfactory for the display of all these plastic qualities are the color and dull lustre of the glaze.¹³

In one of his last lectures as the Slade Professor of Fine Arts at Cambridge University (1933–34), Fry compared Chinese art with the art of other ancient civilizations:

But in early Chinese art we shall find the balance between geometric regularity and sensibility is of an almost unique kind. I think we may say that in no period in Chinese art has sensibility been completely repressed. The notion of the organization of form and of its perfection has never with them implied—as it so often has elsewhere—the suppression of sensibility.¹⁴

As we shall see in a minute, Chinese calligraphy occupies a unique and supreme position in Chinese art. Fry intuitively sensed its importance when he repeatedly talked about “linear rhythm” in Chinese art. He wrote:

[A] Chinese picture . . . never loses the evidence of the linear rhythm as the main method of expression. And this is only natural, the medium used being always some kind of water-color and the art of painting being always regarded as a part of the art of *calligraphy*. A painting was always conceived as the visible record of a rhythm gesture. It was the graph of a dance executed by the hand.¹⁵

However, Fry did not go any further in exploring the significance of calligraphy in the Chinese sense of beauty.

In 1956, when the Chinese artist Chang Ting visited Paris, he met Picasso, who remarked that, had he been born Chinese, he would have been a calligrapher.¹⁶ The pre-eminence of calligraphy in the Chinese sense of beauty raises important questions about the categorization of the arts and the problem of defining beauty in general. In China,

calligraphy has traditionally been regarded as the most important and demanding in the hierarchy of the visual arts. As the Princeton Sinologist Frederick W. Mote put it in his preface to *Calligraphy and the East Asian Book*, Chinese calligraphy as an art form owes its special character to the nature of the Chinese script itself:

Its forms are capable of a vast range of extension and variation, subject to the discipline of traditions and the inventiveness of personal styles, for which alphabetic scripts in the Western tradition offer no counterpart.¹⁷

However, “calligraphy” (Gk. *kalligraphia*, *kalos* beautiful + *graphein* to write) is something of a misnomer in reference to Chinese art, in part because Chinese writing does not involve a simple alphabet of a few dozen symbols; it embraces some 50,000 distinct graphs, giving it a level of diversity and complexity not to be compared with any other modern language. Sinologists have used the familiar term “calligraphy” simply to create a convenient English-language equivalent.

Of all kinds of Chinese artifacts collected by Westerners, calligraphy has been the least understood, and, until the past few decades, there have been very few collections of Chinese calligraphy.¹⁸ Yet, it has exerted one of the strongest influences on twentieth-century Euro-American art. In 1938, Chiang Yee published his book *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique*, based on his lectures at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, during the great International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London in 1935–36.¹⁹ His book was very successful; it attracted the attention of Sir Herbert Read, who wrote the preface to the second edition in 1954 and noted the influence of Chinese calligraphy on artists in a “new movement of painting” in postwar Europe, which included artists such as Pierre Soulages, Georges Mathieu, and Hans Hartung. Chinese calligraphy has also been the source of influence, inspiration, and exploration for many modern and contemporary American artists: Jackson Pollack, Mark Tobey, and Brice Marden, to name just a few. One may speculate that Chinese calligraphy (together with its “ideograms”) served as a means to an end for the Euro-American artists in their search for their own alternative aesthetics.

There are superficial similarities between the eighth-century Buddhist monk Huai-su’s (737–785) cursive handscroll “Autobiography” (dated 777; Figs. 1.16–1.18), and Jackson Pollack’s paintings from the 1950s. Huai-su’s work is described as being done in a “rapid, unin-

errupted flow of darting, looping brush movement.”²⁰ In addition to the formal quality of speed, improvisation, and spontaneity, Huai-su’s calligraphy is itself a discursive literary text. For example, in *Autobiography*, Huai-su quotes poetic couplets by Lu Hsiang, Wang Yung, and Chu Yao respectively, three of his own contemporary critics who commented on his art:

At first [the characters] appears as mist, gently descending over old pines;
Then they transform into peaks that cleave the sky. (Lines 68–70, Fig. 1.16)
[The characters are like] monkeys in winter, shaking up withered vines while drinking water;
[The characters are like] strong men plucking up hills, or flexing iron with all their might. (Lines 71–73, Fig. 1.17)
When [Huai-su] set the brush down, one could only make out flashes of lightning;
The characters completed, one was merely afraid, coiling dragons might rise up. (Lines 74–77, Fig. 1.18)²¹
盧員外云：「初疑輕烟澹古松，又似山開萬仞峯。」王永州邕曰：「寒猿飲水撼枯藤，壯士拔山伸勁鐵。」朱處士遙云：「筆下唯看激電流，字成只畏盤龍走。」

While Pollock’s paintings are appreciated primarily for their non-representational surface, anyone who has some knowledge of the Chinese cursive script can retrace in the mind or even repeat on paper the process in which Huai-su’s work was originally done. Huai-su created his work in the cosmopolitan society of the T’ang empire and its flamboyant and self-confident culture in the eighth century. Through his extremely dynamic and highly eccentric version of cursive script, the *k’uang-ts’ao* (wild or crazy cursive script), Huai-su came down in Chinese history as the paragon of beauty, artistic freedom, and excellence. Although Huai-su was a Buddhist monk, his art of the “wild or crazy cursive script” was inspired mainly by the Taoist approach to art and beauty. Chuang Tzu, the Taoist philosopher discussed above, rarely talks about the fine arts as such, but there are several parables that became central to an understanding of later Chinese thinking about beauty and the pursuit of happiness. First is the parable about Cook Ting, from Chapter 3 of *Chuang Tzu*:

Cook Ting was cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-hui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee — zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music.

“Ah, this is marvelous!” said Lord Wen-hui. “Imagine skill reaching such heights!”

Cook Ting laid down his knife and replied, “What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now — now I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

“A good cook changes his knife once a year—because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month—because he hacks. I’ve had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I’ve cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room—more than enough for the blade to play about it. That’s why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.

“However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I’m doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until—flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away.”

“Excellent!” said Lord Wen-hui. “I have heard the words of Cook Ting and learned how to care for life!”²²

庖丁為文惠君解牛，手之所觸，肩之所倚，足之所履，膝之所踣，砉然騞然，奏刀騞然，莫不中音。合於《桑林》之舞，乃中《經首》之會。文惠君曰：「嘻！善哉！技蓋至此乎？」庖丁釋刀對曰：「臣之所好者道也，進乎技矣。始

臣之解牛之時，所見无非牛者。三年之後，未嘗見全牛也。方今之時，臣以神遇，而不以目視，官知止而神欲行。依乎天理，批大郤，導大窾，因其固然。枝經肯綮之未嘗微礙，而況大軋乎！良庖歲更刀，割也；族庖月更刀，折也。今臣之刀十九年矣，所解數千牛矣，而刀刃若新發於硎。彼節者有間，而刀刃者無厚，以無厚入有間，恢恢乎其於游刃必有餘地矣，是以十九年而刀刃若新發於硎。雖然，每至於族，吾見其難為，怵然為戒，視為止，行為遲。動刀甚微，謦然已解，如土委地。提刀而立，為之四顧，為之躊躇滿志，善刀而藏之。」文惠君曰：「善哉！吾聞庖丁之言，得養生焉。」

The second parable is about the woodworker Ch'ing, from chapter nineteen of *Chuang Tzu*:

Woodworker Ch'ing carved a piece of wood and made a bell stand, and when it was finished, everyone who saw it marveled, for it seemed to be the work of gods or spirits. When the marquis of Lu saw it, he asked, "What art is it you have?"

Ch'ing replied, "I am only a craftsman—how would I have any art? There is one thing, however. When I am going to make a bell stand, I never let it wear out my energy. I always fast in order to still my mind. When I have fasted for three days, I no longer have any thought of congratulations or rewards, of titles or stipends. When I have fasted for five days, I no longer have any thought of praise or blame, of skill or clumsiness. And when I have fasted for seven days, I am so still that I forget I have four limbs and a form and body. By that time, the ruler and his court no longer exist for me. My skill is concentrated and all outside distractions fade away. After that, I go into the mountain forest and examine the Heavenly nature of the trees. If I find one of superlative form, and I can see a bell stand there, I put my hand to the job of carving; if not, I let it go. This way I am simply matching up 'Heaven' with 'Heaven.' That's probably the reason that people wonder if the results were not made by spirits."²³

梓慶削木為鐻，鐻成，見者驚猶鬼神。魯侯見而問焉，曰：「子何術以為焉？」對曰：「臣工人，何術之有！雖然，有一焉。臣將為鐻，未嘗敢以耗氣也，必齊以靜心。齊三日，而不敢懷慶賞爵祿；齊五日，不敢懷非譽巧拙；齊七日，輒然忘吾有四肢形體也。當是時也，無公朝，其巧專而外滑消；然後入山林，觀天性；形軀至矣，然後成見鐻，然後加手焉；不然則已。則以天合天，器之所以疑神者，其是與？」

Perhaps one of the most fascinating artists who exemplifies the Taoist approach to art is the eighth-century painter Wu Tao-tzu. The

ninth-century critic Chang Yen-yüan summarized the style of Wu Tao-tzu's figure painting in this manner:

And therefore such was the virile manifestation of spirit-resonance that it could scarcely be contained upon painting silk; such was the rugged freedom of his brushwork that he had to give free expression to his ideas on the wall.²⁴ [. . .]
所以氣韻雄壯幾不容於縑素。筆迹磊落。遂恣意於牆壁。

Wu Tao-tzu was endowed by Heaven with a vigorous brushwork [brushstroke], and even as a youth he had acquired the divine mysteries of the art, and would occasionally paint [fresco] on the walls of Buddhist temples, employing according to his fancy strange rocks that [looked as though] one might touch them, and rushing torrents from which [it seemed] one might dip [water].²⁵

吳道玄者。天付勁毫。幼抱神奧。往往於佛寺畫壁。縱以怪石崩灘。若可捫酌。

To understand better Wu Tao-tzu's stylistic origins, however, one has to turn to his training in calligraphy, because the greatest achievement of Wu Tao-tzu, according to Chang Yen-yüan, lay in his brushwork.²⁶ And as the ninth-century critic Chu Ching-hsüan pointed out, "what is incomparable is his brushwork, which is always profusely varied and full of an untrammelled energy."²⁷ Like Huaisu, Wu Tao-tzu learned calligraphy from Chang Hsü.²⁸ Chang Hsü, called *Shu-tien* or "Calligraphy Eccentric" and *Ts'ao-sheng* or "Sage of Cursive Calligraphy" by his contemporaries, achieved a personal style that was uniquely energetic, full of movement, and charged with force, even within a single stroke.²⁹ As Wu Tao-tzu studied with him, one can expect that Chang Hsü's style of calligraphy, marked by an extravagant rendering of brushwork and rapid execution, might have exerted a decisive influence on Wu Tao-tzu's style of figure painting.³⁰

A number of stone engravings have been suggested as probably being based on the design or style of Wu Tao-tzu.³¹ The engraving (Fig. 1.19) on the terrace of the *Tou-wang-tien* ("Basilica of the King of Tou") at Ch'ü-yang, Ho-pei, is particularly interesting.³² It depicts a mountain spirit who, as the inscription on the stone tells us, is "flying down like a white devil with a spear. Swift as wind he descends from the clouds to kill and to strike; an agent of Heaven, who deals out punishment and clears up secrets, so that the country and the people may be peaceful

for ever.”³³ The figure, with its thinning and thickening of ever-moving line-work, gains an intense life of its own, swelling and bursting through the powerful and plastic realization of the demoniacal form.

Two stories about Wu Tao-tzu are instructive about Chinese approaches to art. In the first story, he once painted a landscape on the wall of the palace but did not reveal it to the Emperor until it was finished. He pointed to a grotto in the painting and clapped his hands. A door opened and the artist stepped into the picture and vanished with it before the eyes of the Emperor. In the second story, he painted five dragons on the walls of the palace; every time that rain fell, vapor rose from these pictures.³⁴ Unlike his predecessors, who were more interested in realism, Wu Tao-tzu brought about a more dynamic and spontaneous expression through swirling monochrome and ink-washes. This change paved the way for the rise of the *I-p'in* or “untrammelled style” in painting in the late T'ang dynasty (618–907).³⁵ Since that time, the “untrammelled style” has appeared throughout Chinese art history, from the literati artists of the Sung dynasty (960–1279) to contemporary artists in the Chinese diaspora, such as Gao Xingjian in Paris. As the Japanese art historian Shimada Shujiro puts it: “The *I-p'in* style began by emancipating painting from the orthodox mode which ‘conformed to the object in portraying forms’ through the use of firm, fine brushwork; it stood in direct opposition to that mode. Whenever there arose a dissatisfaction with orthodoxy in painting, whenever something new was sought outside its pale, in whatever period, something of an *I-p'in* nature was apt to be born.”³⁶

Through the uses of inks of different intensities and shades and ever-changing brushwork, Kuo Hsi's “Early Spring,” signed and dated 1072 (Fig. 1.20) has created a dreamlike illusion of lights and shadows, suggesting a landscape where the trees are in dense mist when the winter is over and the spring is coming. The contours of the mountains and rocks are not sharply delineated; rather, the tops of the mountains are revealed by the trees behind the clouds. Kuo Hsi's mastery of ink and brush is shown not only in his treatment of misty clouds, the chiaroscuro of the mountains, and the shapes of the tree trunks and old roots, but also in the strategic placement of people in the landscape. The British artist Julian Bell has written sensitively about this painting:

You must wander your way through his brushwork slowly—budge right round the challenging foreground rocks to the bridge where a diminutive figure sets the scale; clamber up past the waterfall, where the homely roofs of a town await you; but

now you have lost all access to the equally enticing deep valley on the left, while the dizzy peaks float out of your reach like so many dreams in the morning. All that binds the image together is the painter's responsiveness to the head-to-foot length of silk confronting him, as if its blankness were alive, as if each brushstroke must wrest from that fabric the life infusing the object at hand [...] For an equivalent speculative tone and sense of personal experiment, European art would have to wait four centuries till the time of Leonardo.³⁷

Building on his experience and understanding of Wu Tao-tzu and Kuo Hsi, on whose work he wrote insightful comments, the late eleventh-century statesman and artist Su Shih (1037–1101), also known as Su Tung-p'o, developed a theory of literati painting (*wen-jen-hua*) which was greatly shaped by his experience in Taoism as well as in Ch'an, one of the sects of Buddhism, which in turn had incorporated a great deal of Daoist ideas about the creative process. Just as Ch'an generally downplayed the importance of the preparatory discipline, so too Su Tung-p'o downplayed any specifically artistic training that might be necessary for the scholar painter. He wrote:

The use of the brush comes naturally to him.
It is like the case of those who are good at swimming;
Each one of them could handle a boat.³⁸
高人豈學畫
用筆乃其天
譬如善游人
——能操船

But just as the Ch'an master built on a strongly established sense of discipline in leading the student towards enlightenment, so too did Su Tung-p'o turn to the scholar's training in calligraphy as an artistic foundation, for every educated Chinese would have mastered the discipline of the writing brush. Here the mastery comes when there is no longer any conscious control or direction of the brush, when the cause of the mind and the effect of the brush's movement are absorbed into a spontaneous unity that must be experienced to be understood. As the discipline of living out Ch'an freed the mind for enlightenment, so did mastery of the brush free the hand to catch faithfully the vision that was found in the mind. It was free to "do," because its discipline had mastered the problem of "how." Ch'an enlightenment and artistic

revelation were thus both based on the foundation of an underlying discipline that had to be first mastered. Once this mastery was achieved, then one was free to abandon oneself to Ch'an enlightenment and artistic expression. There was no need for conscious seeking or artistic skill. Only the spontaneous brushwork of the liberated hand and mind was important.

To stress further the distance from artificiality and conscious artistry, Su Tung-p'o invoked the image of the dream, for:

What is divinely imparted in a dream is retained by his mind;
 When he awakes he relies on his hand forgetting brush technique.³⁹
 夢中神授心有得
 覺來信手筆已忘

The artist forgot the conscious artistry of the brush, and relied on his hand to spontaneously express the essence that was retained in his mind. Su Tung-p'o wrote about his older contemporary Wen T'ung (1018-1079), who was well versed in the art of ink paintings depicting bamboo:

Thus, in painting bamboo one must first have the perfected bamboo in mind. When one takes up the brush and gazes intently, one sees what one wants to paint. Then one rises hurriedly and wields the brush to capture what one sees. It is like the hare's leaping up and the falcon's swooping down; if there is the slightest slackening, then the chance is gone. [Wen T'ung] taught me in this way, and I could not achieve it but understood the way it should be done.

Now if one knows the way things should be and cannot do it, inner and outer are not one, mind and hand are not in accord. It is a fault stemming from lack of studying. In other words, the reason why one may see things in the mind, but be awkward in executing them, is that what one sees clearly in everyday life is suddenly lost when it comes to putting it into practice. Does this apply only to bamboo?⁴⁰

故畫竹必先得成竹於胸中，執筆熟視，乃見其所欲畫者，急起從之，振筆直遂，以追其所見，如兔起鶻落，少縱則逝矣。與可之教予如此。予不能然也，而心識其所以然。夫既心識其所以然，而不能然者，內外不一，心手不相應，不學之過也。故凡有見於中而操之不熟者；平居自視了然，而臨事忽焉喪之，豈獨竹乎？

This unconscious unity of inner and outer, of hand and mind, is thus necessary for the expression of the living essence of things. The whole process may be described as a forgetting of conceptualization, whether verbal or artistic, and direct confrontation with the essence of things. Then all distinctions will be wiped away in a fusion of self and object; the artist will be so completely involved in the essence of what he is painting that he will become the object itself.

Invoking his favorite philosopher Chuang Tzu, Su Tung-p'o once wrote a poem on a bamboo painting by Wen T'ung:

When Yu-k'o [Wen T'ung] painted bamboo,
He saw bamboo, not himself.
Nor was he simply unconscious of himself;
Trance-like, he left his body.
His body was transformed into bamboo.
Creating inexhaustible freshness.
[Chuang Tzu] is no longer in this world.
So who can understand such concentration?⁴¹

與可畫竹時
見竹不見人
豈獨不見人
嗒然遺其身
其身與竹化
無窮出清新
莊周世無有
誰知此凝神

According to Su Tung-p'o, having become the object he is painting, the scholar-painter can now far surpass the mere artisan:

The artisan of the world may be able to create the forms perfectly, but when it comes to the lightness, unless one is a superior man of outstanding talent one cannot achieve it. In bamboo and rocks, and leafless trees, [Wen T'ung] can truly be said to have grasped their way of being: now they are alive and now dead, now twisted and cramped, and now regular and luxuriant. In the roots and stems, joints and leaves, in what is sharp and pointed or veined and striated, there are innumerable changes and transformations never once repeated; yet each part fits in its place, and is in harmony with divine creation and accords with men's conceptions. Is it not because of what the emancipated scholar has lodged in it?⁴²

世之工人，或能曲盡其形，而至於其理，非高人逸才不能辨。與可之於竹石枯木，真可謂得其理者矣。如是而生，如是而死，如是而攢拳瘠瘳，如是而條達遂茂；根莖節葉，牙角脈縷，千變萬化，未始相襲而各當其處，合於天造，厭於人意，蓋達士之所寓也歟。

"A Broken Branch of Bamboo," attributed to Wen T'ung and now in the National Palace Museum (Fig. 1.21), exemplifies the art of Wen T'ung in which the mind and the brush become inseparable. The German art historian Roger Goepper has written of this painting:

All the elements of the plant have been drawn with a single confident brush stroke: the sections of the stem and the branches with a firm and elastic writing brush, the counter-pressure of whose springy tip can be felt in the hand; the leaves with a softer and limper brush, which submits obediently to the slightest pressure of the hand. The interaction of the graphic forms resulting from these two techniques largely determine the general impression created by the painting, the individual elements becoming fused in a composition filled with tension and vitality. The diagonal upward movement of the stem is answered contrapuntally by the smaller twigs, while the sudden break diverts the thrust from the top left-hand corner and causes it to fade out into the largest blank space in the composition.⁴³

In perceiving the *li* ("principle") of things (a word which was to become even more important as Neo-Confucianism emerged), Wen T'ung might be said to be perceiving the essence of things. Here the artist's vocabulary differs from that of the Ch'an masters, but the underlying thought structure is strikingly similar. Unlike the idea of conventional painting in the Western sense, where a certain distance remains between the painter and the object and the painter remains in control of the painted image, the new *wen-jen* (literati) painting finds the object controlling the painter. The object takes on a life of its own.

To achieve beauty in a work of art and happiness in life, the key is to attain spontaneity. As Su Tung-p'o observed of his own creative writing such as poetry and prose:

My writing is like a thousand-gallon spring that issues forth without choosing a site. On level ground it flows smoothly and calmly and can go [a] thousand miles in a day with no trouble. When it twists and winds in the midst of mountains, its

appearance changes with the setting, and there is no knowing how it will take shape. But there is one thing I am sure of: it goes when it should go and stops when it has to stop. As for the rest, even I cannot understand it.⁴⁴

Finally, with this accent on spontaneity and lack of conscious skill, the traditional models are no longer of prime importance; everything must have a life of its own that is independent of the past. There are two important implications in this for art itself. First, with the brush skill that comes from the practice of calligraphy being the basis of the new *wen-jen* painting, subjects tend to be those that are open to calligraphic techniques. Consequently, bamboo, rocks, pines, and orchids became important. At the same time, pictorial organization had to be held to an absolute minimum. Simplicity was the key word. The conscious skill needed in organizing larger pictures and vistas was both absent and foreign to the idea of natural spontaneity. Furthermore, as pictorial ambition increased, the pictures tended, except in the hands of a few supreme masters, to disintegrate into pieces that have no larger visual integration or unity.

A direct heir to the *I-p'in* tradition can be found in Liang K'ai of the thirteenth century. The immortal or sage in a painting by Liang K'ai (Fig. 1.22) rambles smilingly and drunkenly. Several quick swipes of ink (in what is usually called "splashed-ink" [*p'o-mo*] technique) sketch out the figure from shoulder to feet while revealing his inner spirit; they incorporate the soul of the painted figures and the spirits of ardent viewers in all ages. This painting exemplifies Su Tung-po's argument that "If anyone discusses painting in terms of formal likeness, / His understanding is nearly that of a child."⁴⁵ In the West, both classical antiquity and Renaissance culture considered that art possessed an essentially illusionist nature; Michelangelo is described as angrily hitting his "Moses" because the statue would not talk or move. Chinese literati were more interested in art's capacity to summon reality and to enter communion with nature. Some modern Western artists, through intuition, arrived at a conclusion similar to that of the Chinese. Picasso once said to Malraux, "You're the Chinese one, you know Chinese proverbs. There's one that says the best thing ever said about painting: one must not imitate life, one must work like it."⁴⁶

We can see a continuance of this tradition in the present century in an ink painting (Fig. 1.23) by Gao Xingjian, who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2000 after he left China for self-imposed exile in France. He is also an accomplished painter whose style of ink painting

can be characterized as belonging to the great Chinese literati tradition of *hsieh-i* (literally “writing of the idea”). This style allows him to create subtle, intuitive settings and characters that move in the limits between figurative and abstract art in the same way as many of the great masters in Chinese art history. His paintings explore the expressive possibilities of ink and washes; the nuanced light and dark shadings, subtle washes, textures, and volumes in his paintings are both dramatic and refreshing. This painting is Gao Xingjian’s interpretation of a poem by the poet-painter Wang Wei (ca. 700–761) of the eighth century. In Gary Snyder’s sensitive translation from 1978, the poem reads:

Empty mountains:
 No one to be seen.
 Yet—hear—
 human sounds and echoes.
 Returning sunlight
 Enters the dark woods;
 Again shining
 On the green moss, above.⁴⁷
 空山不見人，
 但聞人語響。
 返景入深林，
 復照青苔上。

Gao Xingjian himself wrote about his ink paintings, “Even when faced with a market choked with trends and fashions, or an environment saturated with political utilitarianism, if the artist is able to remain unmoved, if he does not compromise, then he will be the type of artist who can create a new aesthetic value, and who will continue to write art history.”⁴⁸ Gao Xingjian’s ink paintings demonstrate that the Chinese literati tradition of achieving beauty through spontaneity, a tradition that was pronounced dead many times by Chinese and foreign critics in the twentieth century, is alive and well.

Having explored the Chinese sense of beauty, let us now turn to the Chinese aesthetic category called *hsü-shih* (“emptiness and substance”) in order to suggest a more sympathetic approach to modern and contemporary Chinese calligraphy and ink painting

Hsü-shih (emptiness-substance) is one of the most frequently used terms in Chinese art and literary theory and is therefore crucial to

understanding Chinese art and literature in general and the visual arts in particular. In Chinese, the pair of terms *hsü* and *shih* appear to be opposite yet are complementary. Depending on the contexts in which these two terms appear, *hsü* can mean void, empty, unreal, absent, figurative, insubstantial, or imaginary while *shih* can mean solid, full, real, present, concrete, or substantial. When joined in a compound, *hsü-shih*, they often refer to the ways in which the artist deals with those things in a poem or painting that are real and present to the reader or viewer (*shih*) and those things that are absent and left to the imagination (*hsü*).

Hsü and *shih*, like *yin* and *yang* in traditional Chinese philosophy, are two complementary forces, interlocking and mutually interdependent. Also like *yin* and *yang*, *hsü* and *shih* often figure prominently in writings by European and American scholars and artists who have examined differences between early modern Chinese art and literary theory and early modern European theories. For example, George Rowley wrote in his *Principles of Chinese Painting*, first published in 1947:

The relation between solids and voids will tax our aesthetic sensitivity more than any other problem in Chinese design. . . . This is not a matter of technique, since empty parts, in the sense of space free from the touch of the brush, will normally not appear in our [early modern western] tempera, fresco, or oil techniques but only in drawing and water color. The crucial question is what these empty parts signify.⁴⁹

Rowley speculated that:

In China, the emphasis on intuition, imagination and the moods of nature led to the importance of the mysterious, the intangible and the elusively expressive. Both east and west sought reality, but in one, the universal truth was to be captured in the forms, and in the other, the mystery resided in the forms and in something beyond the forms. The painter begins with the pictorial reality of *shih*, then suggests through *hsü* (emptiness) the reality of the spirit beyond form. . . .⁵⁰

Rowley's comments were useful to his readers who were looking at paintings similar to the thirteenth-century artist Hsia Kuei's "Twelve Views of Landscape," now in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (Fig. 1.24). Although Rowley's comments come off today as essentializing,

it is to his credit that he discussed the different shades of meaning for “emptiness” in Chinese and Japanese art. Whereas Rowley tended to essentialize and mystify Chinese painting and its “principles,” Roger Goepper, writing in Germany about two decades later, provided a more historicized view. Like Rowley, from whom he quotes, Goepper was also fascinated by the empty, unpainted areas in early modern Chinese painting, but he observed perceptively, “The monk-painters of the Southern Sung [Song] period [1127–1279], who gave so much space to empty areas in their pictures, seem never to have expressed themselves in writing, and *later theoretical texts* speak predominantly of the compositional interplay of the two elements [of the object (*shih*) and the void (*hsü*)].”⁵¹ It is significant that Goepper recognized the historical development in the use of *hsü-shih*, thus avoiding the typical tendency in many modern writers outside China of seeing Chinese culture as unchangeable.

As far as art theory is concerned, references to *hsü* and *shih* appear frequently in Chinese texts on painting written after the sixteenth century, although these terms were discussed in literary theory from the Sung dynasty (960–1279) onward. Perhaps the earliest text to discuss these terms directly in relation to art is *Hui-shih wei-yen* (ca. 1620) by Tang Chih-ch’i and *Hua-ch’an-shih sui-pi* (ca. 1620) by Tung Ch’i-ch’ang.⁵² Tang Chih-ch’i’s and Tung Ch’i-ch’ang’s texts suggest that a more self-conscious attitude on the part of both artists and writers toward this issue developed during the seventeenth century, even if today we can see that earlier artists may have been aware of these concepts through literary theory.

At first glance, *shih* may seem to be a positive quality since it refers what is real or substantial. But *shih* was not necessarily regarded as the better, stronger, or more preferable quality of the two, just as *yang* was not necessarily considered stronger than *yin*. Rather, the fact that *hsü* comes before *shih* in the compound term of *hsü-shih* implies that *hsü* can be more desirable than *shih* in artistic value. *Hsü*, for instance, can be regarded as a desirable state of mind for cultivation. In Chapter 4 of *Chuang Tzu*, using Confucius as his mouthpiece, Chuang Tzu writes: “The way/Tao gathers in emptiness [*hsü*] alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.”⁵³ Often, *hsü* is regarded as the larger world or even the universe, and therefore as an object of observation and contemplation for artists and poets. In Chapter 13 of *Chuang Tzu*, entitled “The Way of Heaven,” we read: “Emptiness [*hsü*], stillness, limpidity, silence, inaction are the root of the ten thousand things.”⁵⁴ Lu Chi (261–303) writes in his *Rhymeprose on Literature* (*Wen-fu*) about the challenge

facing the poet: "We [poets] struggle with Non-being (*hsü-wu*) to yield Being (*yu*); we knock upon Silence for an answering Muse."⁵⁵ *K'ung* (emptiness), a synonym of *hsü*, is often regarded as the appropriate mental preparation for artistic creation. For instance, Su Tung-p'o wrote in a poem:

If you wish to make the words of your poetry subtle and
miraculous,
Never tire of *emptiness* and stillness.
Being still, one can therefore understand the movements of
multitudes of things;
Being *empty*, one can therefore receive ten thousand worlds.⁵⁶
欲令詩語妙，無厭空且靜。靜故了群動，空故納萬境。

Hsü-shih is related to being and non-being, or presence and absence (*yu-wu*), a fundamental antinomy in Chinese philosophy. The importance of *wu*, or absence, in Chinese philosophy in general and artistic discourse in particular, can be found in Chapter 11 of *Tao Te Ching*:

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel;
But it is *on the space where there is nothing* [*wu*] that the utility of
the wheel depends.
We turn clay to make a vessel;
But it is *on the space where there is nothing* [*wu*] that the utility of
the vessel depends.
We pierce doors and windows to make a house;
And it is *on these spaces where there is nothing* [*wu*] that the utility
of the house depends.
Therefore, just as we take advantage of what is, we should
recognize the utility of *what is not* [*wu*].⁵⁷
三十輻，共一轂，當其無，有車之用。埴埴以為器，當其無，有器之用。鑿戶
牖以為室，當其無，有室之用。故有之以為利，無之以為用。

Before we elaborate on other dimensions of *hsü* and *shi* and their function in Chinese art, let us look again at the painting (Fig. 1.23) by the contemporary Chinese writer Gao Xingjian, whose paintings in general explore the expressive possibilities of ink and wash, subtle nuances of lighter and darker tones, textures, and volumes, resulting in artworks both dramatic and refreshing. The painting can be regarded as his expression of a poem by the poet-painter Wang Wei (ca. 700–761) of the

T'ang dynasty. The poem has been translated more than twenty times into Western languages. We have encountered earlier Gary Snyder's sensitive translation, but below is Pauline Yu's version:

Empty mountain, men unseen,
 Only men's voices are heard echoing;
 The slanting sunset light enters the deep wood,
 Shining again on the green moss.⁵⁸
 空山不見人，
 但聞人語響。
 返景入深林，
 復照青苔上。

In this poem, the first line can be regarded as *hsü* because it highlights what is absent—there are no people to be seen on the mountain. The second line would have been understood as *shih*, for the voices are real—they can be heard. The interaction between what is actually present and what is only inferred animates the poem. The dynamic interaction between *hsü* and *shih* in Gao Xingjian's painting resonates with the poem and further enhances the tension between abstraction and figuration of his work.

Perhaps we can begin our elaboration on *hsü-shih* by looking at the physical living space of the literati, namely the literary garden. One of the most important principles in the design of a Chinese literary garden is the proper interaction of emptiness [*hsü*] and substance [*shih*]. For example, in his essay "Footnotes to Allegory Mountain" ("Yu-shan chu"), the late Ming and early Ch'ing scholar Ch'i Piao-chia explains how he designed his garden:

The bridges and gazebos, paths and peaks are dotted here and there, forming a rhythm with their wave-like contours. In general terms, therefore, what was once empty [*hsü*] has been given substance [*shih*]; that which was originally substantial has been rendered empty [*hsü*]; what was gathered together has been dispersed, and what was dispersed has been gathered; what was precipitous has been leveled and what was level has been made precipitous. Like the skilled physician, I have prescribed potions with restorative and purgative properties; like an able general, I have deployed my troops in formations designed for frontal attack and for ambush. . . . This then is an account of the structures contained within the garden that I have created.⁵⁹

與夫為橋、為榭、為徑、為峰，參差點綴，委折波瀾。大抵虛者實之，實者虛之，聚者散之，散者聚之，險者夷之，夷者險之。如良醫之治病，攻補互投；如良將其治兵，奇正並用。……此開園之營構也。

In the 1809 *Six Records of a Floating Life* (*Fu-sheng liu-chi*), Shen Fu (1763–?) gave the following advice on designing a garden, beginning with some general principles regarding the subtle application of *hsü* and *shih* to evoke space:

In laying our gardens, pavilions, wandering paths, small mountains of stone, and flower plantings, it is best to [allow viewers] to discover small details amidst large formations; to discover real things [*shih*] amidst the illusory [*hsü*], as well as discovering the illusory [*hsü*] amidst the real [*shih*]. Some things should be hidden and some should be obvious, some prominent and some vague. Arranging a proper garden is not just a matter of setting out winding paths in a broad space with many rocks. If a garden designer thinks that, it will only be a waste of time and energy.

若夫園亭樓閣，套室迴廊，疊石成山，栽花取勢，又在大中見小，小中見大，虛中有實，實中有虛，或藏或露，或淺或深。不僅在“周”“回”“曲”“折”四字，又不在于地廣石多，徒煩工費。

Continuing on, he wrote:

Here is a way to show the real [*shih*] amidst an illusion [*hsü*]: arrange the garden so that when a guest feels he has seen everything he can suddenly take a turn in the path and have broad new vista open up before him, or open a simple door in a pavilion only to find it leads to an entirely new garden.

虛中有實者，或山窮水盡處，一折而豁然開朗；或軒閣設廚處，一開而可通別院。

There are several ways of creating an illusion [*hsü*] amidst reality [*shih*]: make a gateway into a closed yard, and then cover it over with bamboo and stones; the yard beyond, while real [*shih*], will then look like an illusion [*hsü*]. Or, on top of a wall build a low railing; it will look like an upper balcony, creating an illusion [*hsü*] from reality [*shih*].⁶⁰

實中有虛者，開門於不通之院，映以竹石，如有實無也；設矮欄於牆頭，如有月台，而實虛也。

The creative combination of *hsü* and *shih*, as seen in extant Chinese literati gardens and literature on garden theory and history, was a major feature of aesthetic consciousness in early modern China and can be seen in many extant gardens, such as the Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets (*Wang-shih yuan*) in Su-chou (rebuilt around 1760 and again toward the end of the eighteenth century); a modified version of this garden has been erected as the Astor Court inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.⁶¹

Another important component in garden design that incorporates the logic of *hsü-shih* is the ever-present rocks, especially that type of garden rock called Lake T'ai rocks. Characterized by some scholars as petromania or litholatriy, the Chinese literati's appreciation of natural rocks as objects of art evolved in part from the notion that life is the result of interaction between *yin* and *yang* or positive and negative processes: if water of the Lake T'ai is *yin*, then the rock manifests *yang*. Among the three primary desiderata of rocks mentioned in classical sources we find *shou* (leanness), *chou* (surface texture), and *t'ou* (foraminate structure with multiple holes and openings). *T'ou* relates to the solid parts of the rock as *hsü* relates to *shih*. The holes and the rock embody the interplay of empty and solid forms. As John Hay comments: "The holes in rock invite us inward. Foraminate structure not only offers us access to the interior, it exemplifies the function of interiority and is thereby a metaphor of reality itself."⁶²

Turning from the application of *hsü* and *shih* in the large space of the Chinese literary garden, we now look at how the creation of a balance of empty and substantial forms has been applied to seal engraving. First of all, one of the most salient features of seal engraving is its small size. For the cultured literati, however, the small size of a garden or a seal was no detraction. Indeed, it was precisely because of its small size that the principle of *hsü-shih* was particularly relevant and useful in the literati aesthetics in which spectacle is vulgar and to be avoided at all costs. What Shen Fu (1763–?) in his *Fu-sheng liu-chi* said of the principles in designing gardens can be said of seal engraving as well: "To show the small in the big, and the big in the small."⁶³

The appreciation of compact dimensions is also evident in Cheng Hsieh's comment on his bamboo and rock garden:

In front of my tiny room is a small yard in which stand several bamboo and a few rocks in the shapes of bamboo shoots. Since it is not large, it requires little money. It has the sound of wind and rain, shadows thrown by the sun and moon, and a cordial

atmosphere in which to drink or write poetry, and there are friends about to keep me company when I am relaxing or feeling low. . . . Some people spend vast amounts building gardens and pavilions, but then travel far and wide as officials and cannot return to enjoy them. I cannot afford the time to travel to the great mountains and rivers. I would rather know the happiness of living in this small room, which will last for many years and will always be stimulating. Contemplating these picturesque surroundings, I do not find it difficult to condense everything and hide it away in some secret place or to expand it to fill the whole world.⁶⁴

十笏茅齋，一方天井，修竹數竿，百筍數尺，其地無多，其費亦無多也。而風中雨中有聲，日中月中有影，詩中酒中有情，閒中悶中有伴。……彼千金萬金造園亭，或游宦四方，終其身不能歸享。而吾輩欲游名山大川，又一時不得即往，何如一室小景，有情有味，歷久彌新乎！對此畫，構此境，何難斂之則退藏於密，亦復放之可彌六合也。

Like Cheng Hsieh's small garden, where the interaction of *hsü* and *shih* provided the illusion of vastness and seemingly endless varieties of possible views, seal engraving likewise could create a microcosm within which the virtual gestures of the world could be captured.

Another principle of garden design mentioned by Shen Fu is also quite significant for seal engraving: "To see substance in void and to see void in substance."⁶⁵ In seal engraving, the interaction of emptiness or space and substance, or written characters, is of primary importance. One of the most frequently mentioned desiderata in seal engraving is to achieve the effects of being "spacious enough to walk a horse in" (*shu-k'o tsou-ma*), or being "so crowded that not even a breath of air could pass through" (*mi-pu t'ung-feng*), or being "not even a needle could pass through" (*mi-pu jung-chen*). *Shu* (spacious) and *mi* (crowded) are analogous to *hsü* and *shi*.

This conception of the seal (and seal impression) as a microcosm, and the importance of *hsü-shih* configuration in a seal engraving is deeply rooted in philosophical Taoism. It can be found, for example, in Chapter 11 of *Tao Te Ching* cited above. A seal is a self-sufficient world that has its own dynamics similar to those embodied in the *yin-yang* configuration in the well-known ancient Chinese emblem called *Tai-chi-t'u*, or the Diagram of the Primordial Unity. In the *Tai-chi-t'u*, the sigmoid line bisecting the circle represents the movement or play of forces around the unchanging center. *Yin* and *yang* can be seen as analogous to *hsü* and *shih*. Ideally, then, the visual image of a seal (and

its impression) should be similar to that of a piece of calligraphy or a painting in which a whole “world” (*Ching-chieh*) is created by the artist; this “world,” of course, is not merely an imitation of the external world but the artist’s conscious arrangement and manipulation forces within the work of art itself.

Like a painting or a work of calligraphy, the microcosm of a seal engraving can also be approached in terms of the endless varieties and interactions of tension and resolution, symmetry and asymmetry, balance and instability, unity and fragmentation, economy and intricacy, consistency and variation, singularity and juxtaposition, positive and negative, or contrast and harmony.⁶⁶ Among these interactions within a work of art, the deliberate manipulation of interactions between emptiness [*hsü*] and presence [*shih*] is certainly among the most fascinating artistic practices to have developed out of the Chinese tradition of critical thinking, as seen in a seal impression from *Wu Jang-chih yin-p’u* by Wu Hsi-tsai (1799–1870) (Fig. 1.25).

During the early modern period in China, calligraphy remained at the core of much of the theory and practice of painting, in particular from the Yuan Dynasty onward (1260–1368). Chang Yen-yüan (active ninth century) of the Tang dynasty was among the first writers to elucidate the importance of calligraphic brushwork among classical and contemporary painters in his *Great Paintings Through the Ages*.⁶⁷ In calligraphy, the term *hsü* can refer to the *spatial relationships* between strokes and characters, while *shih* can refer to the *forms* of characters themselves. And so the modern critic Hsiung Ping-min maintains that, among the great masters of the Tang, if the calligraphy of Yen Chen-ch’ing (709–785) can be characterized as *shih*, then that of Ch’u Sui-liang (596–658) can be regarded as *hsü*.⁶⁸ What he means is that Yen Chen-ch’ing’s calligraphy lays stress on the character’s shape, while Ch’u Sui-liang carefully organizes the space within and between the characters.

At the technical level, the *hsü-shih* dynamic informs two of the four techniques of brush handling: *hsü-ch’uan* (empty fist), *shih-chih* (firm fingers), *p’ing-wan* (level wrist), and *shu-feng* (upright brush). We find the same underlying dynamic in the emphasis on *zhishi zhangxu* or “keeping your fingers full and your palm hollow.”⁶⁹ *Hsü-shih* as a conceptual framework for calligraphic practice must be understood as relevant to the art at several levels: individual dots and strokes; the spatial relationships among these dots and strokes within a given character; the relationship between characters and the spaces between them; and the stylistic differences among different artists. Ultimately, at the technical level, a calligrapher manipulates the *hsü-shih* dynamic

as a means to an end, which is the proper balance of *hsü-shih* in a given work of calligraphy, or in the oeuvre of an artist.

Given the intimate relationship between calligraphy and painting in literati visual culture, it is no surprise that the *hsü-shih* dynamic that served as a conceptual frame in poetry and calligraphy was also important in painting, particularly from the fourteenth century onward. In a famous poem, the artist Chao Meng-fu (1254–1322) made specific recommendations on how the principles of calligraphic practice could be adapted to painting:

Rocks like the “flying white” [calligraphic brushstroke], trees
like the large-seal script;
To sketch bamboo also demands conversance with the “Eight
Methods” [of calligraphy].
If there should be one who is capable of this,
He must know that calligraphy and painting have one origin.⁷⁰
石如飛白木如籀，
寫竹還於八法通。
若也有人能會此，
方知書畫本來同。

The “flying white” technique, in which the brush is moved so fast across the substrate that some areas remain untouched by the brush’s hair, and are therefore white, creates a visual effect similar to hatching in pencil drawing. The flying white brushstroke is a good example of interaction of *hsü* and *shih* within a single stroke.

During the late Ming dynasty, Tung Ch’i-ch’ang further developed the notion of a calligraphic approach to painting, not only in his own paintings, but also in his art theory. For instance, he maintained that

When a scholar turns to painting, he should apply to it the methods used in writing unusual characters, such as in Cursive (*ts’ao*) or Clerical (*li*) scripts, making his trees resemble curved iron bars, or painting his mountains to look as if they were drawn in sand. The narrow path of sentimentality and convention should be avoided. Then the artist’s painting will be imbued with a scholarly sensibility. Even if the work is technically competent, if an artist follows the path of mere imitation, it will exhibit the pernicious characteristics of the professional artisan.⁷¹
士人作畫，當以草隸奇字之法為之。樹如屈鐵，山似畫沙，絕去甜俗蹊徑，
乃為士氣。不爾，縱儼然及格，已落畫師魔界，不復可救藥矣。

Wen C. Fong further commented:

In applying calligraphic techniques to painting, post-Sung literati painters developed a new kind of painting, using a language that created multiple layers of meaning. Rather than simply investigating nature, later painters attempted through calligraphic brushwork to use style as subject matter to allude to history and to connote meaning. Beyond mimetic representation, pictorial form became a text to be analyzed and read. Finally, in that it upheld the artist's right to self-expression, the new aesthetic also lent validity to his claim to succession in a historical legacy of like-minded earlier masters.⁷²

Mainly through the influence of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, we find three developments in late Ming and early Ch'ing painting to which later artists would return again and again for inspiration: a tendency toward abstraction, a positive use of empty space, and a holistic approach to pictorial composition. The tendency toward abstraction is one of the most characteristic features of that period. We have already observed what Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, underscoring this tendency, said of the nature of painting as art: "From the standpoint of splendid scenery, painting cannot equal [real] landscape; but from the standpoint of the sheer marvels of brush and ink, [real] landscape is not at all the equal of painting."⁷³

In identifying the distinctive values of landscape painting as the "sheer marvels of brush and ink," Tung Ch'i-ch'ang drew the natural landscape closer to the abstraction of calligraphy; in his paintings and theories, the abstract qualities of brush momentum, design, and texture are, as discussed above, akin to those of calligraphy. The forms of trees and rocks were one with the movement of the brush, and the overall distribution of light and dark areas was conceived in terms of a dynamic momentum.

One of the many cogent commentaries Tung Ch'i-ch'ang made on the subject of *hsü* and *shih* in painting is as follows:

You must understand the principles of emptiness [*hsü*] and substance [*shih*]. . . Substance and emptiness are complementary in function. If the composition is too sparse, the painting will lack profundity; if the composition is too dense, it will lack elegance. Only when the artist sensitively weighs the empty spaces against the presence of forms, incorporating both into his conception, only then will the painting be naturally unique.⁷⁴

須明虛實。…… 實虛互用，疏則不深邃，密則不風韻，但審虛實，以意取之，畫自奇矣。

Later in the seventeenth century, the more conservative followers of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, some of them working at court, would form what some call the Orthodox school, but his more innovative followers continued to explore the eccentric, disturbing, or even irrational aspects of his style. As Wai-kam Ho and Dawn Ho Delbanco have perceptively observed:

The one-corner composition of Southern Sung [1128–1279] allowed space to travel out into an infinite beyond. Tung [Ch'i-ch'ang], by contrast, restricts it in the center or by using it as a containing border around central forms, he abruptly cuts off space and undermines any sense of solidity established elsewhere in the composition. The painting becomes a two-dimensional pattern, but at the same time, the energies generated from the tensions of contrasting representational modes continuously travel in three dimensions in and around the painting.⁷⁵

Thus Tung Ch'i-ch'ang pioneered the path to increased abstraction in the seventeenth century. One finds, for example, an orchestration of abstract visual forces in both Ku T'ien-chih's 1649 handscroll "Landscape in the Style of Huang Kung-wang" in the Cleveland Museum of Art, and Wang Yüan-ch'i's 1702 hanging scroll "Autumn Mountain: After Huang Kung-wang," in the National Palace Museum.⁷⁶ In both paintings, reality is abstracted through the use of multiple, incompatible horizons defined by projecting shores and solid land masses disposed so as to enclose empty expanses of water. Like their predecessors from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, the seventeenth-century artists did not completely reject the Sung understanding of naturalistic space, but they felt free to offer their own, idiosyncratic interpretations of nature by incorporating incompatible spaces, through flattening of forms, and other techniques leading to greater abstraction. With abstraction, the door to fantasy, de-familiarization, and heightened personal expression opened more widely for artists during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and indeed down to the present day in the work of many of the more inventive Chinese artists.

In contrast, the art of Tai Chin and Wen Cheng-ming of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was a kind of intellectualized and decorative

naturalism, because they were still more interested in capturing an object for our eyes, however stylish their paintings might appear to be.

The late Ming development toward abstraction gave rise to a more self-conscious manipulation of emptiness and presence, namely, the positive, structural use of void [*hsü*] in paintings by both the "Orthodox" artists and the "Individualists." This, too, marks a new departure from the sixteenth-century practices of Wen Cheng-ming and his followers. Although Wen school masters exhibited a strong interest in surface design, in general they were more concerned with filling the surface with details than with making structural use of empty space. The tension in Wen Cheng-ming's 1548–50 hanging scroll "A Thousand Cliffs Contend in Splendor" in the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, for instance, belongs to a different historical moment than Chu Ta's undated hanging scroll "Landscape after Kuo Chung-shu" in Cleveland.⁷⁷ The former is filled with intersecting diagonals creating tensions across the pictorial space. The dynamics in the Chu Ta, however, emerge from the push-and-pull movement of empty spaces. A good example of this is the way in which the form of the void in the lotus stem is echoed by the space of the rock in Chu Ta's undated handscroll "Birds in a Lotus Pond," formerly in the collection of John M. Crawford, Jr. and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁷⁸

Ta Ch'ung-kuang (1623–1692), a contemporary of Wang Hui and Yun Shou-p'ing, went further than Tung Ch'i-ch'ang in theorizing the use of *hsü-shih* in landscape painting in his *Hua-ch'uan* (ca. 1670):

It is difficult to give form to what is empty, and it is through the painted scene that the unpainted scene becomes visible. A state of mind cannot be painted, yet it is through the real scene that the mental scene comes to life. If the composition is improper, the painted area becomes useless; when emptiness and substance give birth to one another, the unpainted area becomes a wondrous realm.

空本難圖，實景清而空景現；神無可繪，真境逼而神境生。位置相戾，有畫處多屬贅疣；虛實相生，無畫處皆成妙境。⁷⁹

The painter Wang Yüan-ch'i also was more creative in his use of void than, for example, the Su-chou artist T'ang Yin of the sixteenth century. In T'ang Yin's undated handscroll "Parting at Chin-ch'ang" in the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, the blank areas contribute very little to the creation of tension in the picture.⁸⁰ In a collection of his colophons entitled *Lu-t'ai t'i-hua-kao*, Wang Yüan-ch'i writes:

Among the artists of the Sung and Yuan dynasties, they all sought to convey energy [*ch'i*] in the substantial [*shih*] areas of the painting. Only the Mi family artists [Mi Fu and Mi Yu-jen] sought to convey character within empty [*hsü*]. Yet in the "substantial" that is within the "insubstantial," there resides a kind of inhaling and exhaling within each section, a call and response, subtle transformations and great vitality.

宋元各家，俱於實處取氣。惟米家於虛中取氣，然虛中之實，節節有呼吸，有照應，靈機活潑。⁸¹

It is significant to note that Wang Yüan-ch'i emphasized the primary importance of dealing with in *hsü* the creation of a style that contributes to "energy" (*ch'i*).⁸² Wang Yüan-ch'i made positive use of the empty areas depicting water, mist, and flat plains to enhance the abstract pictorial design in his 1711 handscroll "Wang-ch'uan Villa" in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁸³ Charged with the same dynamic visual presence as the solid forms, the empty areas unify the landscape by interacting with the solid forms, while the structures made up of empty paper enhance the dynamic equilibrium of the landscape. In contrast, the empty areas representing water in Wen Cheng-ming's "A Thousand Cliffs Contend in Splendor," mentioned above, merely surround the solid land masses and function only as background areas or quiet intervals of rest. Artists working in that period were not yet concerned with exploring the more abstract qualities of painted shapes.

During the sixteenth century, generally speaking, one portion of a picture was always more important than other areas. The central theme or object would appear in one stylistic mode, usually the artist's best, whereas the rest of the picture might receive more conventional treatment. This inevitably led to an additive approach to pictorial composition in the sixteenth century, in contrast to a more holistic approach in the seventeenth century. This is the third feature that could be attributed to the influence of calligraphic aesthetics in the writings and paintings of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang. The seventeenth-century artist was more concerned with dynamic momentum [*shih* 勢], with a force that would permeate the entire painting. Indeed, Tung Ch'i-ch'ang made precisely this point in his writings, setting himself against Wen Cheng-ming and the Su-chou School, in favor of a more kinesthetic approach to pictorial composition:

People nowadays pile up small bits to make up a large mountain. This is one of the worst mistakes. When the classical masters

worked on a large scroll, they made only three or four large units (literally, "divisions and clusters") and in that manner accomplished the whole composition. Although within the composition there are small details, the principal aim is to grasp the momentum (or force, *shih*) of the forms.⁸⁴

今人從碎處積為大山，此最是病。古人運大軸，只三四大分合，所以成章。雖其中細碎處甚多，要之取勢為主。

Among the Orthodox masters, it was Wang Yüan-ch'i who carried this approach to its logical conclusion. In his best landscape paintings, component parts emerge as composite forms or modular units that were used in turn as larger component parts for constructing a greater whole. The paintings were conceived in terms of proportional relationships within these compositional units, as well as in relation to the whole painting. His landscapes were so well ordered in a holistic manner that nothing could be changed without disturbing the whole. Each unit's relative position in the whole becomes more important than its identity as a rock or tree. This holistic approach to pictorial composition can be found not only in landscapes but also in other subjects in seventeenth century painting. For example, the pair of hanging scrolls "Mynah Birds, Old Trees, and Rocks" (Fig. 1.26) and "Mynah Birds and Rock," in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and the hanging scroll "Fish and Rocks," in the Metropolitan Museum of Art—all by Chu Ta—present such a deceptively simple yet precarious and powerful balance that a slight alternation would certainly upset the whole painting.⁸⁵ It is no accident that it was during the post-Tung Ch'i-ch'ang period in Chinese painting history that more writers commented on the importance of the *hsü-shih* principle. Ta Ch'ung-kuang (ca. 1670) in *Hua-chüan*, Fang Hsun in *Shan-ching-chü hua-lun* (ca. 1795), Tung Ch'i in *Yang-su-chü hua-hsüeh kou-shen* (ca. 1800), T'ang I-fen in *Hua-chüan hsi-lan* (ca. 1804), Chiang Ho in *Hsüeh-hua tsa-lun* (ca. 1820), Ch'ien Tu in *Sung-hu hua-i* (1820), Hua Lin in *Nan-tsung chüeh-mi* (ca. 1840), Fan Chi in *Kuo-yün-lu hua-lun* (ca. 1795) are some of the best-known examples.⁸⁶ Even in figure painting, we find elaborate discussions of the principle of *hsü-shih* in *Hsieh-chen mi-chüeh* (ca. 1800) by Ting Kao.⁸⁷

At this stage in the argument we might pause and consider how the tradition of *hsü* and *shih* fared in the modern era, a time when the value of Chinese calligraphy and painting was called into question during China's effort to become "modern," a term that, for many twentieth-century reformers basically meant "Western." Let's begin with Wu Ch'ang-shuo (1844–1927), a modern master who was known

for his seal engraving, calligraphy, and painting. Wu Ch'ang-shuo made many freehand interpretations of the ancient Inscription on Stone Drums (*shih-ku-wen*) from the late fourth and early third century B.C.E.; his calligraphic "copies" are in fact recreations derived from a combination of *shih-ku-wen* and bronze inscriptions, often monumental in configuration using brushwork that is both moist and rich. A major source of influence on Wu Ch'ang-shuo's calligraphy and painting was *Chin-shih-hsüeh*, the scholarly study of inscriptions on ancient Chinese artifacts, a fashion that, in turn, was nurtured by *Han-hsüeh*, or the rigorous historical and philological study of ancient texts. *Han-hsüeh* was an important movement in the study of archaeology, paleography, and philology, which flourished during the mid- to late Qing dynasty.⁸⁸ As a result, many ancient script styles acquired fresh, new interpretations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, the styles of many calligraphers, seal engravers, and painters of the modern period, such as Wu Ch'ang-shuo, Huang Pin-hung, and Ch'i Pai-shih, can all be associated with the fashion for *Chin-shih-hsüeh*.

The seal-script calligraphy of Wu Ch'ang-shuo is intimately rooted in the decades he spent studying bronze and stone inscriptions, particularly the Stone Drum Inscription. In the words of Wen C. Fong, Wu Ch'ang-shuo's interpretations "heightened the interest of the individual characters by unbalancing their component parts, recreating the dynamic tensions of the earlier, more pictographic script. The individual strokes, made with a locked wrist and the arm suspended over the table, show a tautly controlled 'round' brushwork, with a centered, 'hidden' tip."⁸⁹ Obvious changes can be observed when one compares his early copies of the Stone Drum Inscription with his later ones. Most apparent is the evolution toward stronger, blunter brushstrokes, as well as more distorted forms, in which the characters either seem to turn in space or are pulled up on the right side. Wu Ch'ang-shuo was capable of great stylistic audacity (unstable equilibriums, deliberate asymmetries, surreptitious regressions of writing toward drawing) which nonetheless are never obvious and for this reason infuse his calligraphy all the more with dynamism.⁹⁰ In short, whether consciously or unconsciously, Wu Ch'ang-shuo's calligraphy is informed by a dynamic that conforms to the traditional understanding of the *hsü-shih* interaction.

The same attention to positive and negative, or presence and absence, can be seen in Wu Ch'ang-shuo's seal engraving, which is characterized by round brushwork and a reserved pace with the seal knife. The structural strength Wu Ch'ang-shuo absorbed from countless

freehand interpretations of the Stone Drum Inscription enabled him not only to achieve an outstanding reputation in seal engraving but also to reinvigorate Chinese flower painting in the literati tradition of *hsieh-i*, or “sketching ideas,” as seen in one of a set of flower paintings in the Tsien-hsiang-chai collection (Figs. 1.27–1.30).

It is significant that, even though Huang Pin-hung (1865–1955) often criticized the Four Wangs of the early Ch’ing and their followers into the Republican era, his own attitude toward Wang Yüan-ch’i could be quite positive. Likely this was so in part because of Wang Yüan-ch’i’s innovative combination of brushwork and dynamic composition, along with his handling of emptiness and substance in his work. In many ways, it is in his attention to a *hsü-shih* organizing principle that Huang Pin-hung can be said to have continued and at the same time reinvigorated this tradition. This innovation can be seen in how he applied calligraphic aesthetics to his paintings. From his lifelong study, Huang Pin-hung came to the conclusion that calligraphy suggests and at the same time embodies the inner workings of nature, and that painting, like calligraphy, should accomplish “the order within disorder,” “the regularity of irregularity,” and “the resemblance of non-resemblance.”⁹¹ More specifically, Huang Pin-hung revealed his own working method in the following statement:

In dotting, one must apply the method of “emptiness within substance” [*shih chung yu hsü*] in order to attain liveliness.⁹²
作畫打點，應運用實中有虛法，才能顯出靈空不刻板。

Huang Pin-hung admired the humanistic ideals of the Chinese literati tradition and its view of culture and nature as being in harmony rather than in opposition. For Huang Pin-hung, the personal cultivation of brushwork should be based on thorough study of bronze and stele inscriptions, rubbings, calligraphy, and literature. From his study of epigraphy and seal engraving, both of which can be considered branches of calligraphy, Huang Pin-hung also discovered several important clues to composition. Quoting the Taoist adage, “Know the white [or void] while guarding the black [or substance]” (chapter 28 of *Tao Te Ching*), he emphasized time and again the importance of the *hsü-shih* dynamic in composing calligraphy, a principle that has informed Chinese theories of the arts—calligraphy, painting, gardening, and literature—from the Six dynasties period to the Ch’ing dynasty.⁹³ He was fully aware of what Tung Ch’i-ch’ang had asserted:

You must understand the principle of substance and emptiness. . . . Substance and emptiness are complementary in function. . . . Only when you sensitively weigh the substances against empty spaces, incorporating both into your conception, only then will your painting attain a natural originality.⁹⁴
 須明虛實。..... 實虛互用。..... 但審虛實，以意取之，畫自奇矣。

To illustrate his understanding of the *hsü-shih* dynamic, Huang Pin-hung drew an analogy to chess, in which the player must constantly be aware of not only the moves already made but also the moves yet to be made: "Painting a picture is like playing chess. Success depends on the ability to create 'living eyes' [*huo-yen* or breathing space], the more the better. What to chess playing are 'living eyes' are breathing spaces to painting."⁹⁵ On this point, Huang Pin-hung went back to some important ideas in Chinese aesthetics: art can be regarded as a game in which there is a dynamic give-and-take between the players, and so the artwork can be thought of as a battlefield where forces are deployed to resolve a conflict. For instance, in a lecture given in 1948 to the Hang-chou Aesthetics Society (Hang-chou mei-hsueh hui), Huang Pin-hung paraphrased a passage that Chang Feng (ca. 1640) of the late Ming dynasty had written in his *T'an-i-lu* (*Discourse in Art*):

A good chess player arranges pieces naturally and gracefully, making a feint to the east but attacking in the west, and then gradually tackling the details, thus taking the initiative in every stage of the game. This shows the player's ability to stay "relaxed." A good painter should also be able to stay "relaxed." At first he makes a loose overall arrangement, then dots and dyes ink layer upon layer to make it look profound and lovely, thus providing a lively impression.⁹⁶
 善棋者落落布子，聲東擊西，漸漸收拾，遂使段段皆贏，此弈家之善用鬆也。畫亦莫妙於用鬆，疏疏佈置，漸次層層點染，遂使瀟灑深秀，使人即之有輕快之喜。

Chang Feng's comparison of painting to playing chess was repeated by later writers such as Wang Kai (active 1677–1700) in *Chieh-tzu-yüan hua-chuan*, Sheng Ta-shih in *Hsi-shan wo-yu-lu* (ca. 1810), Shen Tsung-ch'ien in *Chieh-chou hsüeh-hua-pien* (ca. 1781), and Chang Shih in *Hua-t'an* (ca. 1830).⁹⁷ This comparison is analogous to the earlier comparison of calligraphy to the battle strategy of the brush in that both metaphors call attention to the process of arranging multiple contending yet

interdependent forces in the process of creating a work, whether it be calligraphy or painting, a process François Jullien has attempted to associate with many practices in Chinese culture, from military strategies, to art, to political affairs.⁹⁸

The prevalence of empty space in Chinese painting—that is, areas where no brushwork or ink has been applied—and the interaction of strokes and the space around them in Chinese calligraphy, has not escaped the attention of European and American writers and artists, and has inspired creative interpretations of the *hsü-shih* principle in the twentieth century. Referring to a painting by Ma Yüan, Lawrence Binyon wrote in his 1911 book *The Flight of the Dragon: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan*: “The picture is not filled; it is waiting for our imagination to enter into it, . . . the imagination, being stimulated, and left to act on its own account, was roused to greater energy than by the display of forms in their completeness.”⁹⁹

Matisse wrote about his fascination with the fact that “drawing the empty spaces left around leaves counted as drawing the leaves themselves. In two adjoining branches, the leaves of one branch were more in harmony with the ones of its neighbors than with the leaves from the same branch.” He went on: “When inspiration has taken leaves of the object, observe the empty space between the branches. Observation having no immediate, direct relation to the object.”¹⁰⁰ François Jullien cites such passages to suggest that the late drawings of Matisse share an affinity with the Chinese attention to the *hsü-shih* relationship in calligraphy and painting. In part inspired by Tang Chih-ch’i quoted above, Hubert Damisch gives a helpful explication of this aspect of Chinese aesthetics in his *Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*.¹⁰¹

The endless possibilities of the Chinese calligraphic expression were discovered by several European and American artists in the aftermath of World War II; well-known names include Hans Hartung, Gerard Schneider, Pierre Soulages, Henri Michaux, Mark Tobey, Franze Kline, and Robert Motherwell. Among the many Euro-American artists fascinated by the *hsü-shih* dynamic in Chinese calligraphy and painting (as well as Japanese calligraphy and painting), we can cite Robert Motherwell, who created many works in which the interplay of empty and solid areas constitutes a major element in the composition. In an interview with the art critic Jack Flam in 1982, Motherwell said:

I came to realize how different the spatial conceptions are in my paintings . . . I have been conscious of the Oriental concept of a

painting representing a void, and that anything that happens on a painting plane is happening against an ultimate, metaphysical void.¹⁰²

Since medieval times, Chinese literary and artistic theory has devoted much attention to what many critics called “the image beyond the image” [*hsiang-wai chih-hsiang*], or “the scene beyond the scene” [*ching-wai chih-ching*]. That ideal was advocated by the literary critic Ssu-k’ung T’u (837–908) as early as the ninth century, and many others since. This aesthetic ideal may have been inspired by the Taoist idea of “forgetting the words after grasping the meaning,” a famous line from *Chuang Tzu*.¹⁰³ In short, from ancient times onward in China, a healthy skepticism toward the adequacy of conventional forms of expression recurs as a leitmotif again and again, and the *hsü-shih* dynamic is no exception.

Although it is important to bear in mind that *hsü* and *shih* acquired different meanings in relation to different media, and also in different historical periods or with different authors during the same period, frequent references to the *hsü-shih* dynamic in art theory over several centuries speaks eloquently of its importance in the Chinese tradition of artistic practice. For many of the artists and writers quoted above, a successful work of art was conceived as a fortuitous combination of seemingly contradictory elements—the accidental and the deliberate, the complex and the simple, the sparse and the dense, the minute and the monumental, the abstract and the concrete, black and white, up and down, *hsü* and *shih*. If applied judiciously, an awareness of the *hsü-shih* dynamic provides a prism for understanding modern and contemporary Chinese calligraphy and ink painting.



Fig. 1.4 Anonymous, "Beautiful Women," early 18th century.
The Palace Museum, Peking.



Fig. 1.5 Anonymous, "Beautiful Women," early 18th century.
The Palace Museum, Peking.



Fig. 1.6 Anonymous, "Beautiful Women," early 18th century.
The Palace Museum, Peking.



Fig. 1.7 Anonymous, "Beautiful Women," early 18th century.
The Palace Museum, Peking.

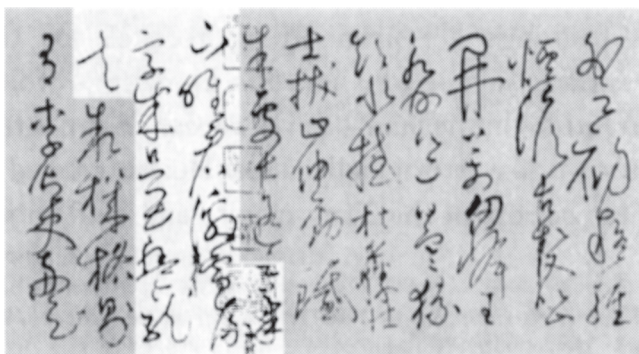
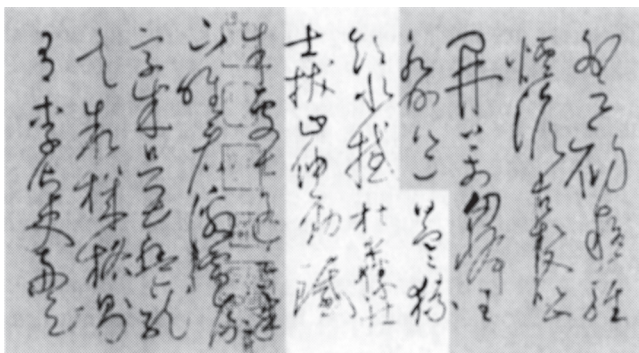
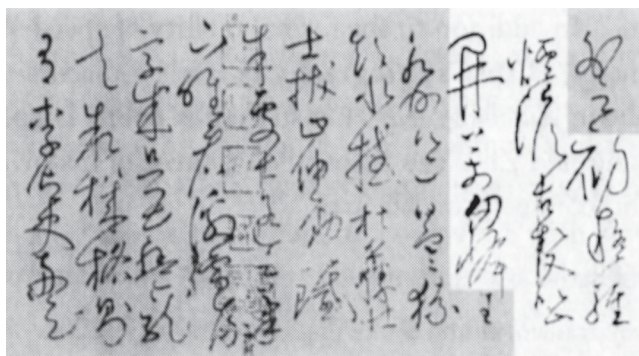


Fig. 1.16 Huai-su, "Autobiography," detail of handscroll, 777.
National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Fig. 1.17 Huai-su, "Autobiography," detail of handscroll, 777.
National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Fig. 1.18 Huai-su, "Autobiography," detail of handscroll, 777.
National Palace Museum, Taipei.

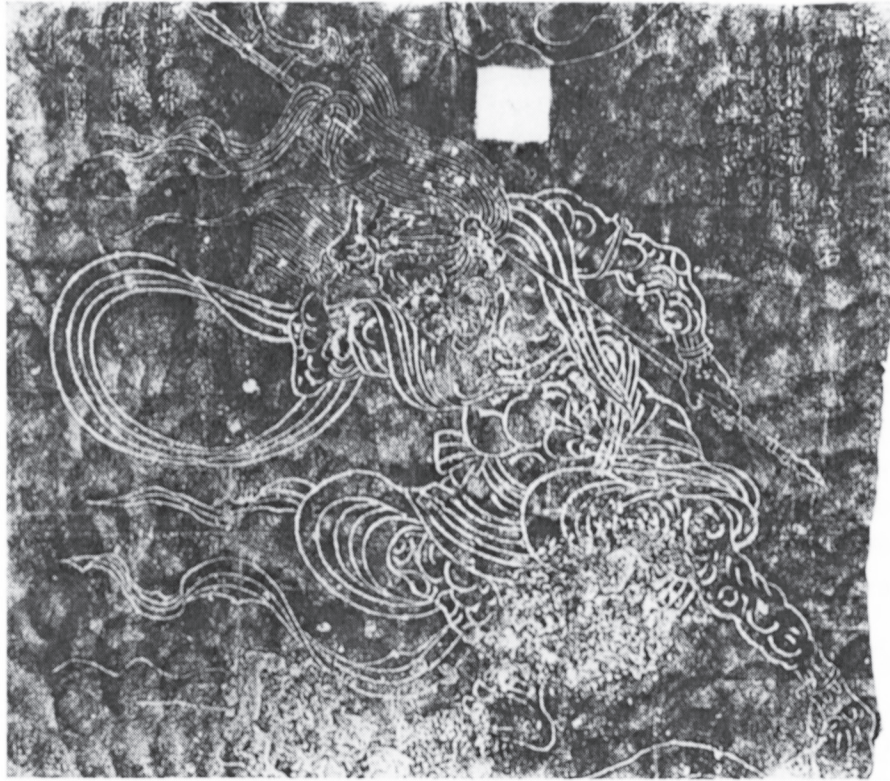


Fig. 1.19 Wu Tao-tzu (attributed), "A Mountain Spirit," undated.
After Sirén, *Chinese Painting*, vol. 3, pl. 88.

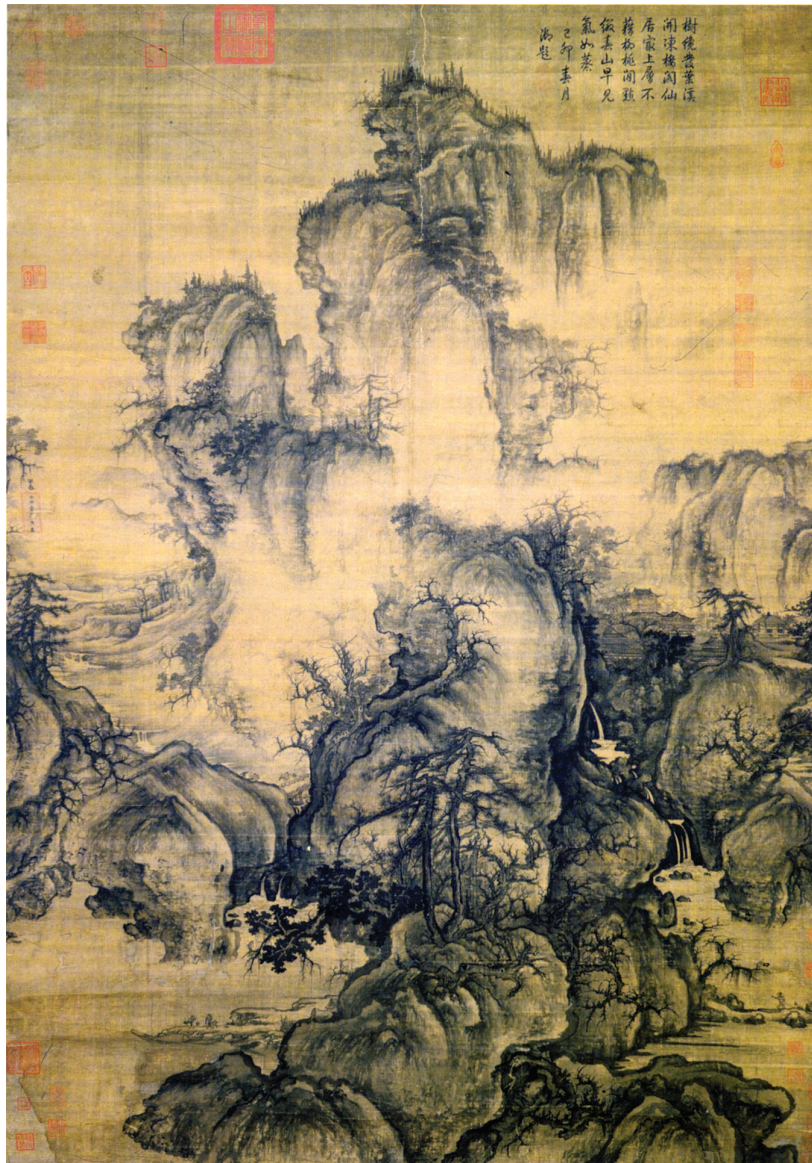


Fig. 1.20 Kuo Hsi, "Early Spring," hanging scroll, 1072.
National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 1.22 Liang K'ai (attributed), "An Immortal," hanging scroll.
National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 1.23 Gao Xingjian, "Empty Mountain," 2000. Private collection, Paris.



Fig. 1.26 Chu Ta, "Mynah Birds, Old Trees, and Rocks," hanging scroll.
Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City.



Fig. 1.27 Wu Ch'ang-shuo, "Lotuses," hanging scroll.
Tsien-hsiang-chai Collection.



Fig. 1.30 Wu Ch'ang-shuo, "Chrysanthemums," hanging scroll, 1896.
Tsien-hsiang-chai Collection.