

Zen and the decline of Chinese painting

by Ray Wei

The Century of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang Wai-Kam Ho

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In China, poetry, music, and early painting all originated from one great invention: the beautifully constructed Chinese language.

The sound of the tongue, with different tunes of a syllable pronounced by Han nation and most of the dialects, makes it possible for ancient poets to relish the strictly regulated verses. Chinese music then derives from singing classical poetry. Furthermore, the pictographic form of the language makes it possible to extend the art of calligraphy far beyond its counterpart in Sanskrit. Chinese characters came from symbols created by cutting pictographs on turtle shells, which were then imprinted as calligraphy on many materials available; calligraphy matured earlier and independently from painting, since paper was invented much later for the development of ink art. Calligraphy is a form of art much appreciated by the men of letters, but it is rather abstract.

Yet to understand the way of art pioneered by classical court painters and the peculiar path taken later by the New Age-type impressionists, we have to differentiate ideas of nature among Chinese philosophies that have been confronting each other for centuries.

Confucians placed great emphasis on the "Way of Heaven" (*T'ian-tao*, the Maxima) and the "Way of Man" (*Jen-tao*, the Minima), viewing "Heaven" not only as "nature," but also as the source of all life and human values. The concept of "Heaven" encompasses the "universe," an organism brimming over with creative life force, the *Logos* that gives people moral commitment to understand Heaven. The creation of life is not viewed as a mechanical physical process, but a spiritual, purposeful procedure. In other words, "man" is the result of "Heaven's" unceasing creation of ever-newer beings with more and more wisdom. Relying on the wisdom and virtues bestowed by Heaven, man creates an increasingly sophisticated and refined culture and cultural

values. Confucianism is the kind of humanism which does not deny the supreme power of Heaven, but seeks to investigate things to understand it.

Confucian principles were shared by many court painters as a result of the examination system for civil service officials which was based on these principles.

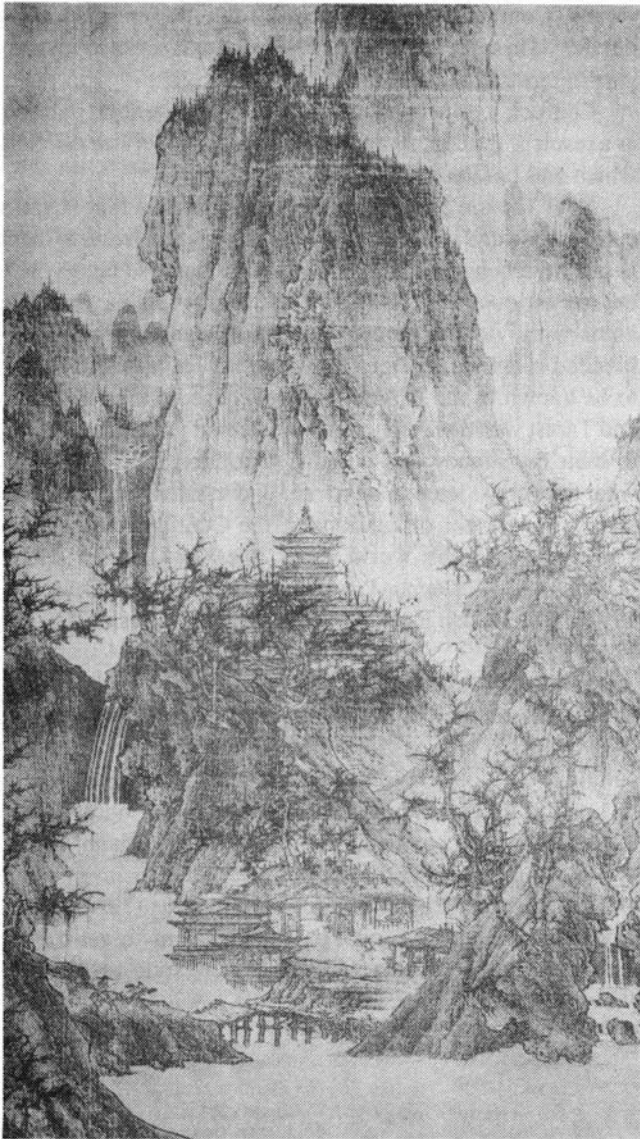
Both Taoism and Buddhism reject the idea that Heaven can be presented intelligibly to human beings. Nature to them is incomprehensible; human life has no purpose but to obey the mysterious Great Way. While Taoism retains a passive and artistic view of nature, Buddhism leans toward an unblended religious sense of art. A faction in art which came to be known as the "literati" school, based on the Buddhist and Taoist world view, typically preferred to paint according to their own fancy and without restriction, and advocated what they considered to be a free, understated, and romantic style. (For further discussions of the Confucian versus the Taoist and Buddhist world views, see *EIR*, Jan. 24, 1992, "Circa 1492: A Deeper Look at Asian Art," and Sept. 11, 1992, "The British Role in the Creation of Maoism.")

The ascent of 'literati' painting

The aristocracy of the T'ang (A.D. 618-907) and Sung (A.D. 960-1279) dynasties were major supporters of Chinese painting. The objective behind artistic works produced in this period was more political and educational significance; in style, the works tended to be elaborate and ornate. But in mid-Sung (ca. 1100), the school of "literati painting" had already emerged. By the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), there was no longer a formal painting academy organization within the imperial palace, so the court style of painting



A mountainous landscape typifying the impressionist style. Tung Ch'i-ch'ang died almost at the end of the Ming dynasty, but his school of painting inaugurated impressionism for the last dynasty, Ch'ing.



Solitary Temple amid Clearing Peaks, by Li Ch'eng (919-967), who was influenced by the geometric theories of Northern School in Sung, conceived a mountain as an internalized construct.

declined. At this point, the "literati" school of painting entered the mainstream, and the leadership in Chinese painting circles fell into the hands of literati painters.

Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636), the most important Chinese painter of the literati school and the most influential writer on the theory of painting in the late Ming (1368-1643) period, based his aesthetics on Zen Buddhism. He named his two studios "Zen of Painting" and "Zen of Ink." Tung's painting opened up a new direction for the later Ch'ing (1644-1911). Tung was interested in the formal structure of the picture and stressed the importance of studying the ancient paintings and calligraphy. As an art theorist, he divided previous Chinese painters into Northern and Southern Schools.

Naturalism, favored by the Northern School and some

of his contemporaries, prized paintings that reflected and imitated the natural beauty. The painting of the Northern School is characterized by colored landscapes executed in linear contours, curves and short strokes. Calligraphy and painting were also kept from influencing each other.

Tung Ch'i-ch'ang's advocacy of the Southern School had a long-lasting influence on later aestheticians, as a result of Zen Buddhism's rising ascendancy over Confucian philosophy, as the Ming dynasty collapsed into moral and economic decay. Tung established the Southern School as the orthodox lineage of painting, enhancing literati painting through its association with Zen philosophy. Later painting and calligraphy became more and more alike, and abstract painting arose as Chinese-style impressionism. Earlier Confucian efforts to artistically capture scientific lawfulness in nature was almost completely lost.

This two-volume set is compiled, including over 700 illustrations, with extensive plates of Chinese painting and calligraphy, with large amount of biographical, and critical material that unveil the past 300 years of Chinese art along the path taken by Tung. A fair portion of the illustrations appeared in exhibitions of the painter in major U.S. cities, which were the largest display of Chinese art ever presented in the West.

Books Received

The Rickover Effect: How One Man Made a Difference, by Theodore Rockwell, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Md., 1992, 411 pages, hardbound \$24.95

The Great Thirst: Californians and Water, 1770s to 1990, by Norris Hundley, Jr., University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, 551 pages, hardbound, \$25

The Passionate Attachment: America's Involvement with Israel, by George W. Ball and Douglas B. Ball, W.W. Norton, New York, 1992, 382 pages, hardbound, \$24.95

Zealots for Zion: Inside Israel's West Bank Settlement Movement, by Robert I. Friedman, Random House, New York, 1992, 263 pages, hardbound, \$23

The Execution Protocol: Inside America's Capital Punishment Industry, by Stephen Trombly, Crown Books, New York, 1992, 352 pages, hardbound, \$20

Memos to the President, by Charles L. Schultze, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1992, 334 pages, hardbound, \$24.95