

The Power of the Chinese Brush

Concentration Paper

Fall Term 1980

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Poetry, prose, calligraphy and painting have long been regarded as the major arts of Chinese civilization. While each art form can be considered separately, there is a fundamental relationship which exists between them. Each form employs the Chinese brush and ink.

One cannot over-emphasize the important role of the brush in the history of Chinese paintings. Each brushstroke that is applied reveals the touch of the artist and has a character of its own. Whether thick or thin; straight or curved, short or long, the combination of strokes establishes shapes. Each shape has its own characteristics: breadth, height, contraction, density, emptiness and balance. The interaction of strokes and voids (negative space) within the painting, creates a tension which must be held in equilibrium.

The Chinese brush is the end as well as the means. The brush was more than just a tool. It provided a means for the revelation of the idea behind the images. The two concepts of technique and idea were in fact, one and the same. Therefore, the brush is not only the vehicle but also the soul of the artist.

The visual qualities behind Chinese painting are frequently misunderstood. This may be due in part to the application of western definitions to Chinese art. To understand the Chinese artist's intentions, one must understand his existence within the realm of Chinese culture. For instance it has been said that the Chinese way of looking at life was not through religion, philosophy, or science, but primarily through the arts.

Instead of religion, the Chinese preferred the art of living in the world, instead of rationalization, they indulged in poetic and imaginative thinking, and instead of science, they pursued the fantasies

of astrology, alchemy, geomancy and fortune telling.¹

However, philosophical doctrines such as Confucianism, Taoism and particularly Neo-Confucianism did play a major role in his perception of art.

I will provide a brief overview of these three Chinese philosophical doctrines and their relationship to the arts, particularly painting. I will then critically review the psychological and the physical power of the Chinese brush and its unique revelation of the Chinese cultural and philosophical attitudes.

Finally, I will discuss the Yüan period (1279-1368) and its four major painters. It was during this time that the brush achieved its greatest and most highly visible expressive character.

(2)

Taoism and Confucianism were the basis for the cultural climate of China. While Confucianism emphasized social order and the cultivation of one's intellect, Taoism concentrated on the individual's life and the cultivation of his own peace of mind. Taoism is Confucianism's compliment. The English translation of Tao is "The Way". All things depend on Tao for life. In its substance, it is invisible, vague and elusive. It is nameless. All things come into the world (into being) from non-being. Being and non-being are of equal importance to the Taoist. Tao finds its basis in the cyclical quality of the life cycle echoed in nature.

To operate in a regular pattern, it is nothing mysterious. It is deep and profound (hsuan), to be sure, and it is described as subtle and elusive... But it is neither chaotic nor unpre-

dictable, for it is the "essence" which is "very real", and "in it are evidences"... It is popular, especially in the west, to describe Tao as mysterious, and there seems to be a special attraction to translate hsuan as mystery. It is mysterious only in the sense of subtlety and depth, not in the sense of irrationality.²

The concepts of Yin and Yang are major aspects of Taosim. They reveal the opposite qualities of existence e.g. Yin is female, darkness, death, water and Yang is male, lightness, life and solid matter. Nature was the ultimate source of life and was at the heart of Taoist thought.

The second major doctrine of Chinese philosophy was Confucianism. Unlike Taoism, Confucianism was based on the social rather than on the natural order of things. While Taosim stressed passivity, Confucianism stressed taking action. Taoism was based on the individual; Confucianism was based on society stressing moral perfection and social adjustment. Reverence and decorum were the main Confucian guides. The term li (meaning "rites") was used as a standard of conduct based in tradition. Ritual and learning were the vehicles to achieving social order. In the Confucian view, the character of a man was more important than his work.

The marriage of these two philosophical doctrines, Confucianism and Taoism was Neo-Confucianism. The ritual and social values important to the Confucian and the mystical qualities of nature found in Taoism were fused in Neo-Confucianism. Shen Tsung listed four ways of developing a personality of high quality.

- (1) To purify your heart in order to eliminate vulgar worries,
- (2) To read books widely in order to understand the realm of the principle (li),
- (3) To renounce early reputation in order to become far-reaching,
- (4) To associate with cultivated people in order to rectify your style.³

The first and third of these elements are Taoist in emphasis; the second and fourth are Confucian.

A Neo-Confucian... does not pose theoretical questions about the what and why of man, from an objective point of view...And he refuses to subject his moral feelings to an externalized pattern of intellectual argumentation...Through total immersion in one's own being, can the source of universality be reached. For self control, overcoming the ego is the authentic way to gain inner experience.⁴

(3)

Before discussing the brush in Chinese painting it is necessary to construct the role of painting and its development in Chinese culture. Of the five arts; poetry, prose, calligraphy, literature, and painting, painting was the last to be developed and the slowest to reach maturity. Prose was of service to government and it ranked higher than poetry. When a more personal statement was to be expressed, poetry, calligraphy and painting were outlets for one's subjective feelings. It was during the Yuan period (1287-1360) that prose, poetry and calligraphy were merged into painting.

During the late Han dynasty (25-220 AD), the first known individual painters and calligraphers emerged, indicating that artistic endeavors were worthy pursuits for the intellegensia.⁵ In the Six Dynasties period, (220-589 AD), scholars considered painting a lowly profession. Calligraphy, however was considered perfectly respectable. Before the Northern Sung (960-1127) painting was essentially the art of illustration. Gradually it developed into an art form like like calligraphy or poetry that was to be appreciated for its own unique

qualities. It was not until the Southern Sung (1127-1279) that the status of painting rose from a craft to an intellectual and aesthetic pursuit. A Southern Sung painting was a form of expression in which the personality of the artist was revealed.

Poetry and calligraphy were considered polite arts and an asset for a gentleman's career in government. These talents were often displayed before friends, during intimate social gatherings.

The Yuan period followed the Sung and is perhaps the most important period for the discussion of the role of the brush. This period will be discussed at great length in a later chapter.

The concept of Tao was at the heart of Chinese painting. It affected the artist's imagination, his subject and its interpretation. For the Chinese painter, knowledge of Tao was crucial.

... If one has Tao "the right way", artistic creation proceeds unconsciously since what one does is second nature. 6

Tao resided in the chi (spirit), mood and strength of nature. Chi is the inner mystery of a subject which for the Chinese held the secret of artistic value.

The Chinese insisted first on capturing the spirit, then the form.

If the artist captures chi, everything else follows, no amount of likeness, embellishment, skill or even genius could save the work from lifelessness. 7

While professional painters flourished throughout Chinese history, the truly great painters were of the scholar class, painting for self-fulfillment rather than money. The Confucian gentleman scholar was at the top of the social order in China. The scholar acquired discipline and sharpened his sense of style by

becoming familiar with the works of old masters through the study of antique paintings, ^{which} were copied so that the scholar could learn the stylistic qualities of the work and so that he could re-experience the spirit of the work.

A Chinese painting is like a piece of music brought to life again by a brilliant piano or violinist--coaxed out of an orchestra by the conductor's baton, as splendid and beautiful as ever but in clumsy hands painfully bad. Chinese painting is often nothing more than a new rendering of wellknown piece, a variation on a theme, or even a single 'etude'. The important thing is the quality of the performance.⁸

The scholar perfected his brushwork by practicing calligraphy and refining his perceptions through constant emersion in nature and in literature. Narrow specialization in one area was looked down upon. For the Confucian, painting was intended for moral purposes and therefore its themes had to be considered "worthy".

These Confucian themes may seem quite everyday in character but nevertheless they are so imbued with meaning that they are of genre spirit... scenes inculcated moral principles embodied the whole organization of life including the worship of ancestors, conception of the family as the basic unity of society; they also taught the lessons of history and glorified the scholarly life as an ideal pursuit of man.⁹

(3)

The brush is the most important element of Chinese art. In poetry, calligraphy and painting, the brush is not only a tool but the vehicle for transmitting the soul of the artist. The Chinese brushstroke not only reveals the naturalness

of Tao (i.e. effortlessness), it also conveys the power of the spirit (Chi). To capture chi, the brush must describe the essentials of the form and capture its soul.

The Yin and Yang of ^{the} Taoist was present in painting as well. The brush stood for Yang and the ink Yin. Yang was created through the movement of the brush, capturing the spirit of the subject. Yin was created through the subtlety of the ink tones.

The rhythmic brushstroke reveals the mood of the painting and character of the painter. A western painter's brush usually reveals the formal qualities of the work. It rarely reveals the psychological force behind the images and is secondary to the use of color, texture and value.

In calligraphy, one finds an even greater sense of effortlessness and discipline. When viewed as a whole, Chinese calligraphy appears to have been done with immediacy. Yet when studied carefully, it is a far more complex combination of design principles and chi. Each brushstroke sends off energy in different directions, tension being set up with each new stroke. The completed ideograph is a balanced totality of interlocking forces.

The Chinese scholar was trained from childhood in writing ideographs, which involved two fundamentals of painting; rhythm and relationship. These ideographs were practiced continuously in order for the artist to gain the feel of the brush. In applying the brush to the painting's surface, it was essential that the artist be mentally prepared to execute the stroke without hesitation, and that he maintained complete control of the tip end of the stroke. Again this discipline derived from practicing calligraphy. The competent use of the

brush was reached through arduous practice, becoming instinctive and spontaneous. This was done by coordination of the mind and the body through controlled breathing and concentration.

If rules have become second nature to the painter, if he can lose himself in the conception and if he has attained depth and breadth of character, then he is ready to aspire to that highest kind of freedom of effortless creation. 10

The full potential of a work of art is better realized when the viewer knows its visual language. It is necessary to understand the materials and techniques used by the Chinese artist. The mastery of the brush, the skill of mixing water and ink, and the knowledge of the characteristics of papers and silk are the three basic requirements of Chinese painting and calligraphy. The first element, the brush, is the most important.

The use of the brush dates back to Neolithic pottery. The brush was a soft and flexible drafting tool more like a proto-brush. By the fourth century B.C., the brush was constructed of animal hair shaped to a pliant point and full body. The most popular raw materials have been goat, weasel and rabbit hairs. Goat hair brushes are more flexible than others but lack strength. The weasel and rabbit hair have excellent strength, but are a bit stiff. The Chinese artist used different blends of brushes for various types of brush strokes.

The brush was gripped by the handle tightly with the thumb, forefinger and middle finger. The brush was supported by the other two fingers, a hollow cavity, maintained in the palm. This position allowed for maximum maneuverability. When detailed work was desired, the wrist rested on the table, but when the use of broad strokes was called upon, the whole arm with the shoulder joint as the

fulcrum was used.

Brushstrokes can be divided into two categories. The central point is where the brush handle and brush tip is held perpendicular, to the surface. The central point is used mostly in calligraphy or for sharp lines in painting. The slanting point is where the brush handle is held 45 degrees to the surface. The slanting point is used mainly for textural quality. Personal expression is made possible by the versatility of the Chinese brush. The full use of the brush became evident for the first time during the Northern Sung period. The artist manipulated the brush in the round, using all sides of the tip to create a three dimensional effect.

The Chinese brushstroke represents the height of an artist's accomplishment; freedom with discipline. It is the beauty of paradox swift and powerful stroke of an irrepressible spirit expressed through a totally controlled physical apparatus - wild in style but mellow in feeling. 11

The Chinese artist reduced the content of his painting to its essentials, resulting in a design with the least possible elements. This abstraction with its rhythm and relationship of parts cannot be separated since every brushstroke is part of the design.

The Chinese avoided geometricized composition in favor of more dynamic movement. This was accomplished by the emphasis on the "non-existent", represented by voids. These voids were meant to suggest the mystery of emptiness and intangibility. The Chinese used various devices to describe the interval or voids between forms. The isolation of figures was a standard practice. Isolation suggested that the forms were related mentally rather than physically.

If the empty places are right, the whole body is alive and the more such places there are the less boring and whole becomes. If one ponders over this, one may learn to understand the marvels of the carefully planned designs of the old masters. The emptiness must be alive. 12

Chinese spatial structure suggested unlimited space and it extended in every direction. This was achieved by the development of three spatial units: foreground, middleground and background. The features in the foreground were diminished to avoid obstruction. The more important distant objects are enlarged to counteract the middleground and foreground.

By moving the focus from part to part, by avoiding compositional axis and opening up the view at the sides... suggests a sequential experience in time, a movement beyond the limits of the painting into the boundless infinity of the universe. 13

The Chinese knew little of western modelling until the Ching dynasty (1644-1912). Instead they used the thickening and the thinning brush contours to suggest form and volume. The "brush" contour was used to convey the undulating movement of form in contrast to the western concept of descriptive light which broke up the surface. The Chinese depiction of form was not naturalistic but was symbolic. "The brush outlines shape and in shape the spirit dwells." 14

(4)

The Yüan dynasty, which was established by the Mongols (1279-1368), was relatively short. It marked a break in the political and cultural traditions of the country, which had characterized preceding dynastic periods. After the Mongol conquest lead by Genghis Khan (1260), China was lifted to a leading position in trade with the rest of the world. The Yüan was a period of cultural decline,

and spiritual hardship and anguish for the Chinese people. It was at the same time a period marked by creative activity. Painting, in particular, underwent a major revolution. This was partly the result of the militaristic government of the Mongols. They were wary of placing Chinese scholars in responsible positions, fearing their disloyalty. The scholar class had for centuries held government positions. Previous to the Yuan, gentlemen could reach office either through the influence of highly placed relatives or based on merit through an examination system that stressed literary ability, and familiarity with the classics. Under the Mongol regime, the examination was abolished. Thus Confucian scholars found themselves "unemployed." Many chose to retreat from the active world. They devoted themselves to the study of nature and to their work with brush and ink. From these amateur, reclusive artists came a major, new style.

During the Sung periods, great, landscape masters of the north had portrayed rugged mountains and stark plains. Their southern counterparts, depicted low hills covered with foliage integrated by shifting clouds or fog. The Sung artist made distances remote; and the emptiness poignant.

Yüan paintings are more calligraphic, shapes becoming symbols, transformed by brush and ink. Poetic inscriptions appear in many of their paintings add to the pictorial design. Such paintings should not be looked upon simply as pictorial patterns. They must be read as poems, written with non-conventional symbols. The Yüan opened the door for the development of writing and painting. The Yuan painter simplified, abstracted, and concentrated his forms. The attitude of the Yuan painter is typified by the artist Ni Tsan. In discussing the early Yüan painter Kao k'o-kung:

Whenever he was at leisure he took his stick, a bottle of wine and a book of poetry and sat down on the bank of Ch' ien-t'ang river, looking out over the mountains and wavy hills of Chekiang, observing the appearing and disappearing of the clouds and mist as if trying to grasp them. When occupied with literary writing, he used the brush in painting, thus expressing the lofty concepts of heart. 15

Foremost among the Yuan painters were the Four Great Masters: Wu Chen (1280-1354), Huang Kung Wang (1269-1354), Ni Tsan (1301-1374) and Wang Meng (1301-1385). These men exemplify the idea of individual temperament, reflected in the handling of the brush and ink.

Wu Chen was a true recluse. He was a man of reserved temperament, who aimed at subtle effects. Wu Chen's brushstrokes are limited to a few types, all using the round brush. They^{were} done by keeping even pressure on the brush, which was held vertically, the tip centered within the stroke. No sharp or hooked ends protrude. By drawing in broad, pale strokes, and avoiding extensive washes, Wu Chen erased the distinction between line and wash. His 'brush' is moist and the strokes are overlapped to give the feeling of depth. As a result, in Wu Chen's "Central Mountain" (Illustration #1), his brushwork creates the effect of relaxation and of controlled deliberate movement. The hypnotic repetitions of form which have a distinctive truncated, conical shape exemplify the plainness and blandness of the work. The composition as a whole is simple. Compositional clarity is achieved by no difficult overlapping or interlocking parts. Wu Chen's expressive potential is in the wide spacing of its parts evoking feelings of remoteness, loneliness and disengagement. Wu Chen's painting exemplifies the following ideal: "Keep everything quiet, never shout but whisper your emotions." 16 His calligraphy is in the cursive script. The last stroke of the first character

runs into the first stroke of the next character. This style has a lively quality in contrast to the quieter forms in the painting.

Huang Kung Wang was regarded throughout the Ming period as the ultimate model for landscape painters. Huang was solitary and lofty by temperament. In his essay titled "Secrets of Landscape Painting", Huang Kung Wang makes many points relevant not only to his own painting but to the theory and practice of Painting during the Yüan period:

The method of using the brush in landscape painting is called the continuity of sinew and bone. It is the distinction between "having ink" and "having brush". To blur over the brushwork in places where there is drawing is called "having ink"; when the water-brush (used for applying washes) doesn't intrude on the drawing, this is called "having brush".

In doing paintings it is only the one word li (principal, natural order) that is the most urgent necessity. 17

In Wang's "Dwelling in ^{the} Fu' chen Mountains" (Illustration #2), his sweeping brush reveals the bulging ^{the} billowing of the hillsides and ^{the} cubic structure of the stones. There are rows of horizontal and upright strokes that represent trees and other vegetation. This sets up a quiet vibration against the masses, a kind of visual buzzing that is almost soothing. His strokes have a nervous and tactile quality. They are more than mere two dimensional calligraphy having their own volume and depth. This is created by interweaving and overlapping strokes. One senses or knows how each stroke was applied. Overall, the work reveals a sense of contentment with the everyday world.

Ni Tsan (1301-1374) was eccentric and very aloof. He was obsessively clean, insisting that everything he came into contact with be immaculate. He remained more isolated than any of his contemporaries; more independent in character and

style. Most of his works were done for friends or produced spontaneously at parties. "The inscriptions on his paintings were usually dedications and often tell us the circumstances under which they were painted."¹⁸ Ni Tsan habitually repeated moundshaped masses which were heavily shaded at their base with bare or thinly foliated trees. His ^{landscape} is plain; no vegetation apart from the trees, no variety of hills and rocks. A sense of loneliness and seclusion prevails in his work--one never sees people in them. His composition like Huang Kung Wang's, is made up of discrete units, blocklike masses which are separated by water. In Ni Tsan's "Jung ~~His~~ Studio" (Illustration #3), the intervals between foreground and distance are exaggerated, giving his minimal landscape a sense of detachment and contemplation.

His bleak and vast style is the result of using dry ink over wet ink, dark tone over light tone and by using a crumbly textural brushstroke. His forms are done entirely without washes, giving a sense of transparency and weightlessness. His light strokes loaded with diluted ink reveal no sense of nervous energy. The strokes are soft and the sensitive tonal range is kept narrow and generally pale. It is as though Ni Tsan's bleak and lonely expressions reveal a sense of withdrawal from human involvement.

It is ^{as} though like some Taoist transcendent he has refined away all that is mundane and material, all that grossness that he found so repellent in the real world around him. 19

The youngest of the four Great Masters was Wang Meng, who was the educated son of a socially prominent and intellectually, oriented family. Where Ni Tsan and Huang Kung Wang tended toward sparsely articulated and separate compositional elements, Wang Meng preferred to allow his masses to run together, packing them densely without orderly structure. In Wang Meng's "Dwelling in the Ch'ing-pien

Mountains", (Illustration #4), the hills and mountains are built up by repeated parallel folds with the interior contours echoing the exterior forms' contours. The foreground is stable and builds upward with twisting and thrusting movement. The blank areas of water serve as a relief from the dense activity of the mountains. His work has a rhythmic flow of hemp-fiber wrinkles which curl and intertwine relentlessly with a semicontrolled movement. These textural strokes move upward, dips and shifts sideway. Wang Ta discussed Wang Meng's "Raining Listening Pavilion" (1365), revealing Wang Meng as a man of the brush.

He didn't pursue elegant accomplishment as had his contemporaries, but he only aimed at using his brush conceptions to embody his understanding of the wonders of natural phenomena. 20

Wang Yuan-chi's essay "Yu ch' uang man-pi'", expresses the fresh enthusiasm fond in Wang's painting.

At the end of the Yuan period appeared the four Masters... i.e. Wang Meng, who used 'dragon veins' (hemp-fiber wrinkles) abundantly making them like winding snakes and Wu Chen, who painted them straight lines. These two artists did them quite differently and one has to search for their points of correspondence. Huang Kung-Wang painted them (the dragon veins') neither continuous nor disconnected; in using them he did not use, and in not using he used them. (i.e. dragon veins). If one compares him with the two masters mentioned before, one may observe how different he was. Finally, Ni Tsan, who was not stained by a single speck of dust; there was vigour in his ease and quietness, refinement and beauty in his simple and abridged manner. He went beyond the common rules and manners of brushwork, and he along may be placed in the "i" class (the highest level of brush and human development). 21

(6)

The naturalness of the brush was foremost to the Chinese artist. It was not only a tool but the vehicle for expressing the soul of the artist in prose, poetry, calligraphy and painting. The brush transmitted the artist's concept as well as his character. The knowledge of the idea portrayed was revealed by the effortless vitality of the brush, the use of which was based in calligraphy.

The Chinese brush represents the height of an artist's accomplishment due to its dual qualities of freedom and discipline.

It is the beauty of paradox; swift and powerful stroke of an irresistible spirit expressed through a totally controlled physical apparatus - wild in style but mellow in feeling. 22

In the west, artists have traditionally used devices such as modelling, texture perspective, color and value to achieve their purpose. The Chinese artist, on the other hand, has based his emphasis solely on the brush. In essence the brush was an extension of the artist, a part of him which he instinctively and spontaneously reveals his thoughts and feelings.

Footnotes

¹Wang-go Weng. Chinese Painting and Calligraphy. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1976) p. 8.

²Chan Wing-tsit, translator. The Way of Lao Tzu (Tao-te Ching). (10th printing, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976) pg. 9.

³Van Briessen, Fritz. The Way of the Brush. (Rutland Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1968) pg. 13.

⁴Murck, Christian F., ed. Artists and Traditions. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) pg. 13.

⁵Wang-go Weng, p. xvi.

⁶Bush, Susan. The Chinese Literati on Painting. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) pg. 36.

⁷Rowley, George. Principles of Chinese Painting. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959) pg. 34.

⁸Van Briessen, Fritz, pg. 35.

⁹Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 80.

¹¹Wang-go Weng, p. xxiii.

¹²Van Briessen, Fritz, pg. 72.

¹³Rowley, George, pg. 10.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁵Siren, Oswald. Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles. 7 vols. (London and New York: Lund Humphries and The Ronald Press Co., 1955-1958), Vol. III, pg. 87

¹⁶Rowley, George., pg. 17.

¹⁷Cahill, James. Hills Beyond a River (New York: John Wetherhill Inc., 1976) pg. 87.

¹⁸Ibid., pg. 114.

¹⁹Ibid., pg. 119.

²⁰Ibid., pg. 121.

²¹Siren, Oswald. Vol. III, pg. 92.

²²Wang-go Weng, p. xxiii.

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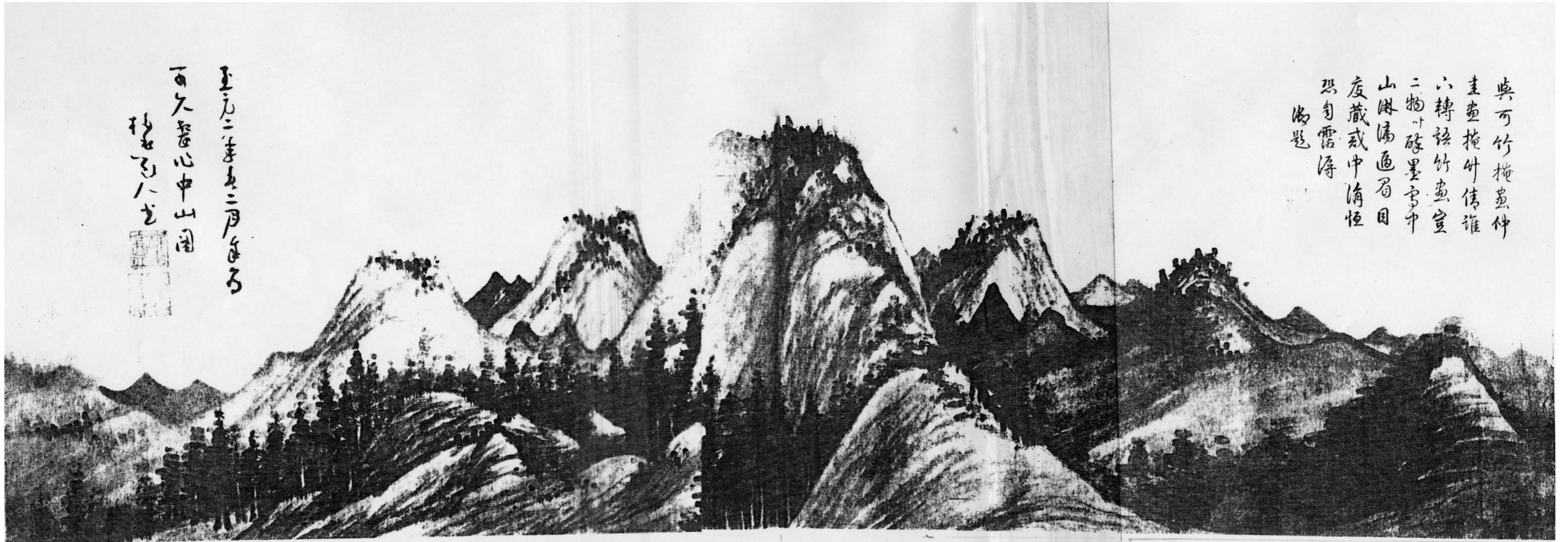


Illustration #1. Wu Chen: "The Central Mountain" (Chung-shan t'u). Dated 1336
Handscroll, ink on paper, 26.4 x 90.7 cm. National Palace Museum
Taipei.



Illustration #2 Huang Kung Wang: "Delling in the Fu-ch'un Mountains." Dated 1350. ink on paper, 33 x 639.9 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Detail of Illustration #2. Huang Kung-Wang. "Dwelling in the Fu-ch'un Mountains." Dated 1350.



Detail of Illustration #2. Huang Kung-wang: "Dwelling in
the Fu-ch'un Mountains." 1350.



Illustration #3.

Ni Tsan. "The Jung-hsi Studio." Dated 1372. Hanging Scroll, ink on paper, 74.7 x 35.5 cm. National Palace Museum Taipei.



Illustration #4. Wang Meng: "Dwelling in the Ch'ing-pien Mountains." Dated 1366. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 141 x 42.2 cm. Shanghai Museum.



Detail of Illustration #4. Wang Meng.

"Dwelling in the Ch'ing-pien Mountains."