



FLYING GEESE BY T'ENG KWEI

ART IN MODERN CHINA

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CHINA at present is in a state of great turmoil—poverty stricken—military exploitation and war everywhere—war with Japan. war between war-lords. War in China, it seems, is everlasting. Unfortunate people flee from their homes to escape misery and to preserve the minimum breath of life. In such a state of bankruptcy in every phase of life, how can China produce art? Yet Chinese art productions are at present incredibly abundant.

It is a mystery which cannot be explained in a few words. However, to be brief, I venture to say that the practise of art in present-day China is possible because of the victory of idealism in the life and death struggle on the part of Chinese artists. The ability to struggle seems to be a national characteristic without which they might have been extinguished long ago. Chinese artists tolerate a discouraging environment, deny themselves much pleasure and comfort, have but little wealth, or live in poverty, spend much time earning a living, and develop their spiritual life by working out their own salvation and expressing their artistic ideals. Although China is passing through a national crisis, art exhibitions are still held in the large cities despite mass meetings, protest, and roaring of guns.

China is still producing art and in remarkable quantity. We are anxious to know what kind of art, classic or modern. If it is classic, how far ancient ideals and forces are perpetuated by present-day artists; if it is modern, what modern thought or what nation's



SNOW LANDSCAPE BY WANG WEI

Copied by Kung-pa King

modern art has influenced the hands and minds of Chinese artists. If neither modern nor classic (in the western sense of the terms), we would like to know in what manner the present art has been modified, or evolved from that of ancient times.

Let us first review the traditional philosophy of art and life of our artists. To them the reality of life lies within the mind. Nothing exists before the thought of it exists. The thought is the only reality. Through thought art is born, and through art the thought is elevated from low to high levels and from crudity to refinement. No art can be called "fine" unless there is this high thought of the artist back of the production, and hence it is capable of elevating or draw-

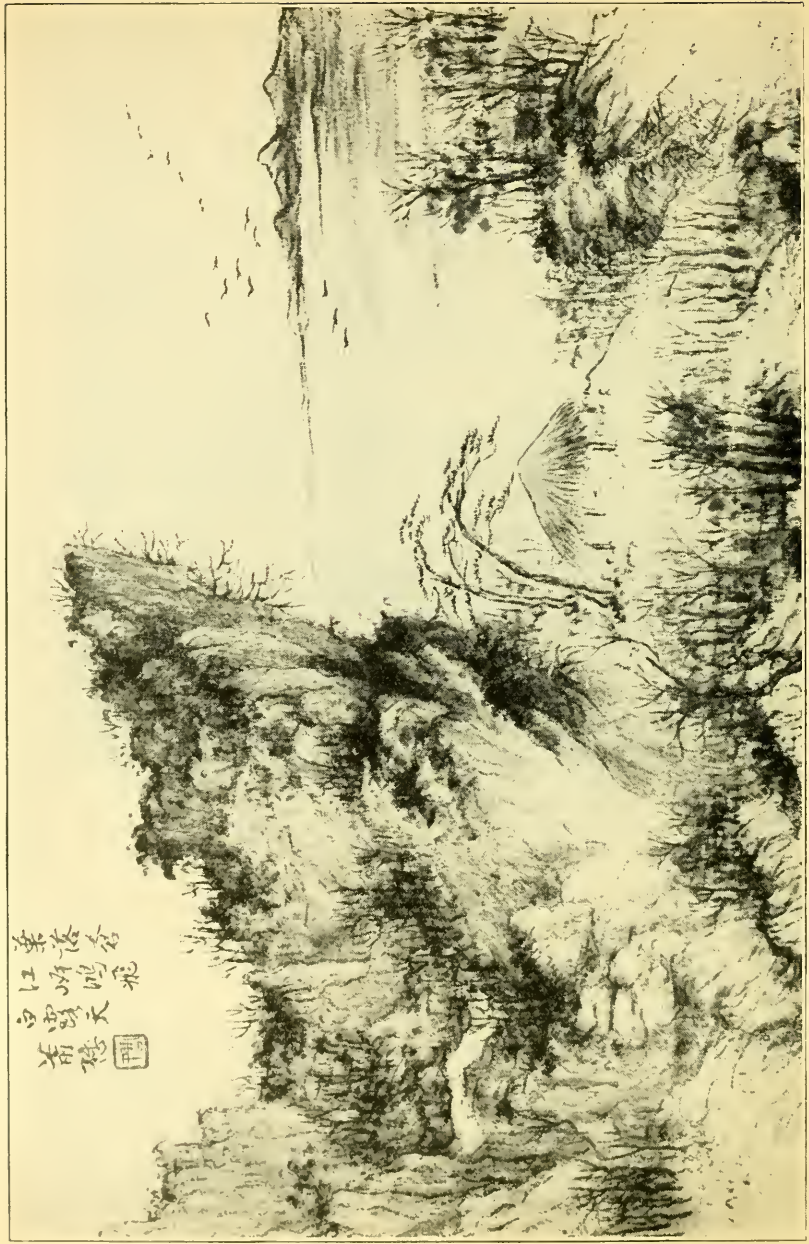
ing forth thought of refinement from the spectators. Thus, life and art to our artists are both idealistic. Physical life is perishable, but art is immortal. To the Chinese artist, physical life is merely the abode of the spirit, and to enjoy an ideal life is to cultivate the spiritual one.

This art is something uncommon, something unearthly, something different from what we always see and have contact with in daily life. Genre painting has never been popular in China. The classical idea of art there has always been something which we long to see but search for in vain. Human beings are enslaved by their desires. Only those desires which can never be obtained, Chinese artists love to paint. Kuo Hi, who lived in the eleventh century, wrote as follows about his conception of art:

Wherein lies the reason that good men love landscape so much? It is because amid orchards and hills man has ever room to cultivate his natural trend; because streams and rocks never fail to charm the rambler who goes whistling on his way. It is because fishing and wood-gathering are natural vocations of the hermit and the recluse, nearby where flying birds and chattering apes have their homes. Noise and dust, bridles and chains—of these man's nature ever wearies. Hazes and mists, saints and fairies—for these man's nature pines eternally and pines in vain. Now comes the painter, and by his skill all these things are suddenly brought before us. In our home, stretched on the walls, we still hear the cries of the gibbons along the streams, the songs of birds in many valleys, while our eyes are flooded with the gleams of hills and the hues of falling streams. Does not this illustrate the saying, "Charmed by another's purpose, I attain my own desire"?

Like the essence of the teachings of Buddhism and Taoism, art in China is a means of escape. The harder the struggle in the Chinese nation, the more unattained desires are there to be expressed through art; and the less peace in the country, the more escape Chinese artists would seek. No matter how fast modern China may change, as long as such ancient ideals are rooted in the minds of artists, there will be no danger of Chinese art being disrupted.

In order to make a survey of this traditional or classical school of Chinese art, one must wend his way to Peking which still remains Chinese, abundant in architecture, active in art craft, rich in historic relics. The people there are less affected by foreign economic exploitation. Peking, so to speak, the museum of Chinese art, has always inspired her inhabitants to cling to her own civilization. Art-



香海所飛
天鳴
德用



LANDSCAPE BY SIAO CHUEN-CHUNG

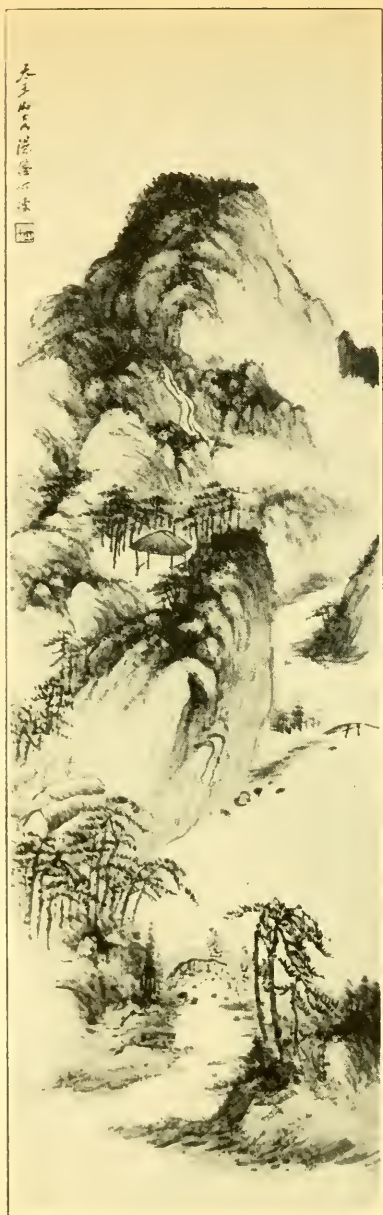
ists there are not only able to study and copy old paintings, which are preserved in the palaces, but there are also favorable working conditions in the way of getting special art materials and an appreciative group in society. Exhibitions of contemporary art are held there all the year round. The Central Park Galleries arrange exhibitions from March to November, and the Peking Institute of Fine Arts has one every month. The art gallery of Yen-ching University is also enthusiastic about patronizing present-day art.

Peking is the seat of the Traditional Conservative School. This school is interested solely in preserving old Chinese art. Most technical and scholarly work has been done by its members. They have copied painstakingly the paintings of the T'ang and Sung dynasties. They copy the strokes and the colors of the paintings; they have even gone so far as to imitate the writing and seals of the master, and their aim has been perfection, so as to make copy and original indistinguishable even to the trained eye. The leader of this school was Kung-pa King, whose influence is still felt strongly among his followers. I have seen Kung-pa King's copy of a snow landscape by Wang Wei, famous T'ang dynasty painter. He not only used a piece of silk the exact size of the original and imitated the aged tone of the painting, but also succeeded in putting the Emperor Hui Tsung's writing there as it appears in the original.

Followers of this school are many, not only because China has such a glorious past that most conservative artists like to have this old sweet dream revealed to them, but also, because academically it is a popular way of learning art by copying the old masters.

Peking artists, however, belonging to this Traditional Conservative School, do not always copy old masters. Many have great creative ability like Hu P'ei-heng and Siao Chien-chung and are able to combine the traditional method of the past with an individual method of their own. An example of great individuality is the picture (page 482) by Siao. He is so sophisticated that he puts his strong statement under a veil of moderate expression. The meeker his execution, the stronger is the statement felt between the lines. The form is solid, but the appeal is harmonious, and the brush is politely exact.

There are still a great many artists who are classical enough in spirit, fine enough in ability to produce art individual enough to be called their own creation. T'ang Ting-chi is another of those artists who lay their art on a thoroughly firm and sound foundation in clas-



LANDSCAPE BY T'ANG TING-CHI

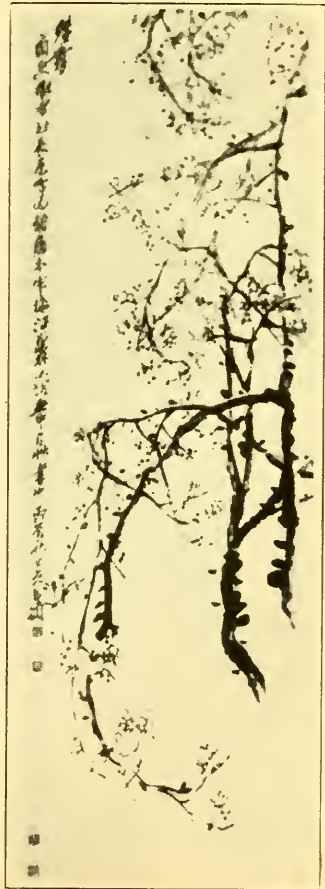
sical tradition. T'ang is an independent painter, adhering to no school. On account of his independence and self-respect, his fame is established through his artistic merit alone. His work speaks louder than the voices of lesser artists who collectively call for their own social prestige. The facile manner in his brush touches, his simplicity in presenting trees and rocks show the definite skill and experience of the artist's hand on this page. He does not waste a single stroke or a dot of ink; every bit of his energy is a necessity. A good artist is a miser in spending ink as he would be in spending gold, because extravagance with material is a sign of deficiency in art.

Other artists who work independently and quietly let their art speak for them. Peking should be very proud of having artists like Siao Ching-hien, Ch'en Pan-ting, and Wang Mong-pei—all with high ideals in their work.

I now wish to introduce two prominent artists from Suchow, Ku Lin-shi and Yu Tai-ts'iu. Ku Lin-shi is a great scholar, connoisseur, and artist. His collection of ancient paintings is well known in the Yangtse Valley, and his painting is often mistaken by Chinese critics as

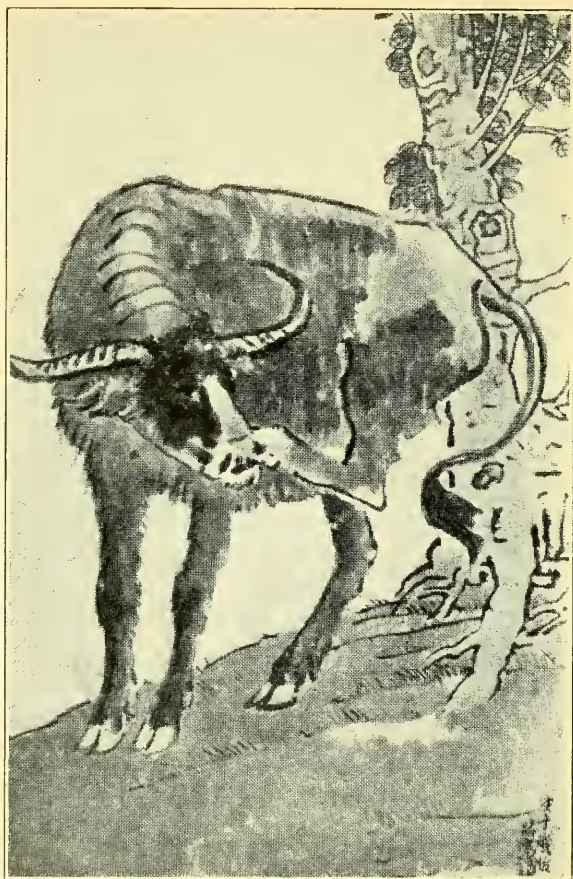
the work of the Four Wang masters of the Ts'ing dynasty. In fact, he may have produced paintings even better than some of those actually done by the Four Wang. Nature is very content under his brush, and it is quite a blessing when one has the good fortune to look at the picture here reproduced (frontispiece): comfortable trees, indifferent rocks, inviting path, and rippling grass—all look most natural and most placid. His brush is at ease everywhere, and his hand is full of experience in every stroke.

Another school is the Traditional Calligraphic School. By calligraphic I mean the free-hand and expression work of art. Painting and calligraphy are interrelated. A good knowledge of and experience in writing are advantageous to painting and *vice versa*. A painter is often a calligrapher, and a good calligrapher often learns to paint easily. Many strokes are common to calligraphy and painting. There were, however, painters not known as calligraphers. They established their technique generally through the practise of painting. Their aim was to paint and to emphasize the object they painted. The medium, such as brush strokes, ink, serves only as stepping-stones through which they accomplish their objective representation; consequently the meaning, expression, and often the beauty of strokes and ink values are lost to them, while the realistic object remains. However, the painter of the calligraphic school is different from his fellow-artists. He thinks that the beauty of the ink values and the expression of brush strokes should not be sacrificed in the least for the sake of sheer realism of the subject matter. Painting is not photography, nor should it be a complete record of the facts. Those who can-



BLOSSOMING PLUM BRANCHES
By Wu T'sang-shu

not appreciate the beauty of language want only the contents of a story, and those who do not know art, look only for the contents of a painting. The Traditional Calligraphic School strives, not only for



WATER BUFFALO BY SŪ PEI-HUNG

the art of representation, but also for a manner of presentation so that not only the end is important to them, but also the means; the expression of the medium as it is controlled, not by the hand alone, but also by the artist's interest.

The picture, "Plum Blossoms," reproduced on page 485, represents this school. The artist, Wu Ts'ang-shu, who lived in Shanghai, is a good calligrapher, drawing instead of painting the picture. His

brush-strokes are strong, wiry, and brisk. The picture makes one feel great freedom of action. The brush is like the monarch, every touch is law.

To the same school I should like to add two more artists, the one being a student who returned from France, the other educated in China. The first, Sü Pei-hung, is now head of the art department at the Central University, Nanking. Sü has a good background in oil. His work can compete with the painters of the French Academy. However, he has preferred to paint in the Chinese style ever since his return. He has tried to subordinate western striving for likeness to the Chinese calligraphic expression. Toward this goal he has advanced successfully. It seems to me that Sü has an ideal which most of us modern Chinese artists should have; that is, to unite all Chinese art tradition with modern realistic observation and scientific approach. Sü is good at animals. He is not only correct as to anatomy, but also has powerful brush expression, and often the action and life of his animals are very expressive (page 486).

The second artist is Yü



LOTUS BY YÜ FEI-AN



LANDSCAPE AFTER THE RAIN BY T'ENG KWEI

Fei-an. Living simply and intensely, he creates a world of his own. He paints for pleasure, edits a paper, and teaches for a living. The lotus picture (page 487) is, so to speak, a symbol of his life. The lotus is a plant which has a clean stalk growing in the mud with a pure white flower, with independent and self-respecting spirit. His technique is bold and simple; he gets a maximum result with a minimum effort. His strokes are calligraphic, yet, at the same time, the anatomy is carefully observed.

Chinese artists do not consider that physical realism is the important thing to look for in art; therefore, photographic representation of nature has long been looked down upon by artists. Instead, Chinese artists go beyond the physical to metaphysics, beyond physical likeness to spiritual likeness. When Hie Ho (A.D. 475) advanced his "six canons" on painting, he placed as first and most important the rule concerning rhythmic vitality. Our artists are not satisfied in translating nature as she is, but want to explain nature as she appears to them or as they wish her to be. In China there is no such thing as "still life," and dead fish certainly do not interest our artists as they do our western colleagues, for a dead fish must be

made alive in painting. Not very unlike the futurists in the west, Chinese artists paint the flight instead of the birds only; like the



A CHICKEN FAMILY BY T'ENG KWEI

impressionists, Chinese artists paint the atmospheric effects of rain, mist, storm, and sunset in the landscape, instead of the landscape as it usually appears to most eyes. I, with many others, aim at

this romantic ideal of masters of the past. In the portrayal of the flight of wild geese (page 479), their speed is clearly felt and their calls can still be heard. In the picture, "After the Rain," the trees are still moist. The picture, represented on page 489, portrays a family of chickens. The father's dignity, the mother's love, the children's innocence are sought instead of showing each feather or any other anatomical detail which means labor rather than art to those who really understand painting. However, not all Chinese artists of this day strive for the same goal as I. There is a group of artists who have gained a substantial social recognition by working on something more naturalistic and even sentimental than action, vitality, or rhythm. Their paintings are true to the facts of nature. I am taking the liberty of giving this group of artists the name "Realistic." This Realistic School has two branches, the northern and the southern; both branches were somewhat inspired by semi-foreign influence during their early stages.

Castiglione, an Italian missionary, came to China at the end of the seventeenth century and took up Chinese painting. He brought to China the scientific method of copying nature. Brilliant coloring, heavy loading of oil technique, and true-to-nature realism, which, acknowledged by all, are the chief characteristics of his painting. Many Chinese artists with high ideals as to existence and reality do not care for his work, but others appreciate it as of artistic merit, ignorant as they are of what art is. Here in Peking there has developed a school of the followers of Castiglione which I call the northern branch of the Realistic School.

Among the dozens of artists mechanically working in this realistic manner, Ch'en Se is the jade among pebbles. He is a young man in his early thirties, now teaching art at the well-known Catholic University in Peking. An example of his work, a copy of Castiglione but with lighter touches, is reproduced on page 491. The dog is very alive and ready to jump up at any moment. It is perfectly real, and this painting is a triumph over the battle with photography.

The southern branch of the Realistic School offers a more interesting phase of our art development. Its seat is Canton, where people are comparatively more alert and active in making foreign contacts. Many artists there searched for a new expression after feeling the necessity of a change in the mode of living. Many of these went to Japan to study and then transplanted to China this



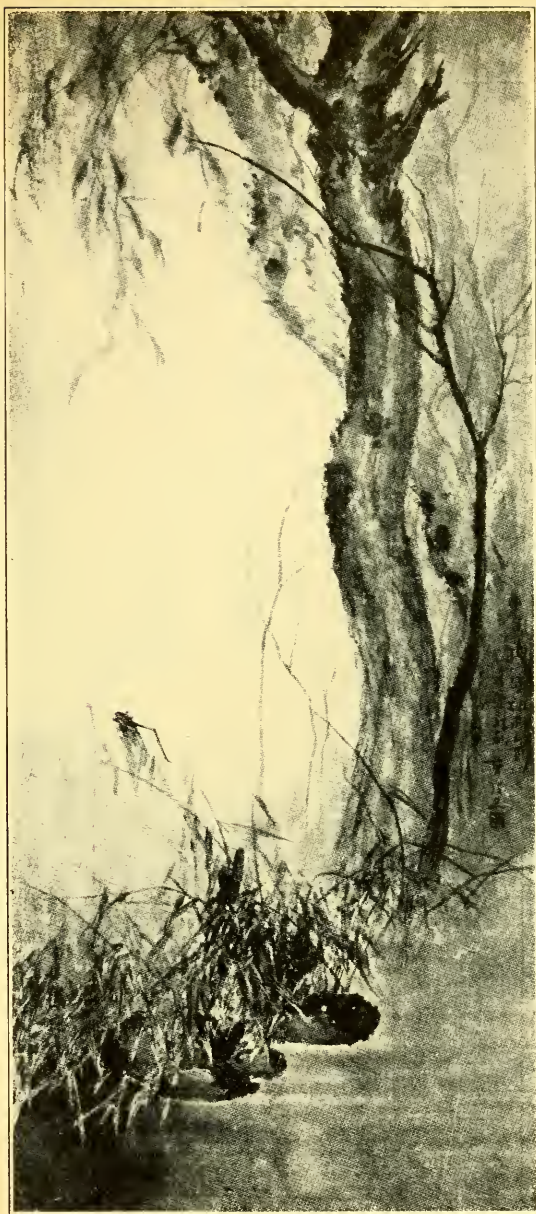
RECUMBENT DOG BY CH'EN SE

new style. In general, art in Japan is like anything else—a syncretism. Besides the pure, old Chinese school, Japanese art is something collected from foreign countries and made anew to suit their convenience. As a result, Japanese art in general is not calligraphic enough to appear Chinese, nor solid enough to be called western. However, like a Japanese girl, it has its own charm and beauty which can be internationally appreciated.

The popular Realistic School of Japanese art, which is natural, literary, and human, often pleasantly charming, is paradoxically of Chinese origin. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, Shen Nan-pin, a Chinese artist, visited Japan, and his art influenced the Japanese greatly. He was an animal painter and excelled in flowers and birds of the Sung academy style, realistic, honest to every feather of the bird and every petal of the flower, painstaking in execution and literary in appeal. He established the Nanking school in Japan, and hence the Cantonese artists have brought back a bride who proved to be their forty-second cousin. However, the modern Japanese popular Realistic School is far removed from the original Nanking school. The Japanese artists, in addition to these characteristics of Shen's art, adopted much from the western method of modeling the subject in light and shadow, and thus the picture is made even closer to nature.

Kao Weng and Kao Lun, two brothers, are fine examples of the southern realistic school. This school of painting will have a strong grip on Chinese art development on account of its oriental origin and scientific rendering of the subject, which makes the art intelligible to all eyes and entertaining to most minds. Kao Weng, although a man in his seventies, is still active in creative work, and his paintings are full of youth and vitality. Kao Lun is the younger brother of Kao Weng. Like his brother he learns truth from nature. "Autumn Rain Comes to the Willow Bank" (page 493) shows the artist's accurate observation of the effects of rain on the landscape. The painting has a high pictorial effect; the details, as well as the composition as a whole, are properly executed.

Thus far I have set forth three different tendencies in the present state of arts in China, namely the Traditional Conservative School whose aim is to preserve China's classical art tradition; the Calligraphic School which follows the romantic school of thought, that aims at free-hand drawing and keeps the unique calligraphic ex-



WILLOWS IN THE AUTUMN RAIN BY KAO LUN

pression in strokes; and the Realistic School whose interest is to adopt western ideas of light effect and scientific rendering of the anatomical correctness of the subject into Chinese art.

Productions of these schools are more or less Chinese in taste and origin, and they continue to develop. However, profuse western influence is not wanting in China today. Very little good work is seen. Chinese artists who are working in this western style incidentally learn the worst from the west. In Shanghai one can find all sorts of foreign arts ranging from the primitive to the ultramodern. When I visited Walter Pach, American critic residing in Paris, he commented on the work of a certain popular Japanese artist as "monkey production." By "monkey" he understood "one who tries to imitate man, but the harder the trial, the worse is the result."

Present-day China is in danger of falling into this "monkey" business. Girls from good families dance to jazz music; boys wear tailor-made suits, and Walk-over shoes, smoke Luckies, read the Saturday Evening Post, and play a good game of golf. Hu Shih advocates China's adoption of western civilization since he has much confidence in both the automobile and the Chinese people. I fear the coming of a "monkey" civilization since I have not enough confidence in either. No doubt China must pass through an industrial revolution to enable every one to live more comfortably. Art is the product of leisure, and leisure can only be accumulated through wealth. After all, no matter how idealistic the Chinese may be, one cannot expect any nation to produce art with the majority of her population almost starving. A great period of art production must be sponsored by patronage and a great demand. Art produced without sufficient wealth and leisure at its back is a forced product. Neither an artificial creation nor a forced production can last forever, for they are both detached from life. To replant Chinese art on fertile soil is the duty of all our artists at present, but the question as to how the soil should be prepared is beyond the scope of this essay.