

Dialogue on the Peasant Art of Huhsien

S. Marie Carson

A prime purpose of our trip to the People's Republic of China was to begin a dialogue with artists there concerning their contemporary art, its function, and their means of implementing their stated project of continuously raising its standards. We sought mutual enlightenment and exchange. Our intentions were warmly welcomed; we received the utmost cooperation everywhere we went.

We had done a lot of homework to familiarize ourselves with their social point of view; long before going we had been struck by the immense import of their concept of 'for whom' art is necessarily created and by the fact that this would dominate our dialogue as well as the dynamics of their creativity. For that their art is to be created—as is everything—for the people would factor every aspect of the interaction of form, content, and individual imagination, with the special effect of eliminating individualism as an ideal; it seemed to us that, if we did not give this careful consideration, it would have to conflict with our feelings about the artist's necessity for freedom of expression and to be disruptive to the wished-for dialogue. In the process of this consideration we became increasingly aware of our bias toward a certain kind of

individual freedom as cultural, but we were also ever more aware of the alienation of the art that extremes of that freedom can and do produce, and had come to recognize that freedom conceived as an expression of subjective individualism had not even sustained what was at least an important revolution in style. We saw that neither does the West any longer have a revolutionary art in any sense of the word nor are our artists truly free. Aside from the fact that any freedom is relative to certain social constraints, the artists are allowed their freedom only when they have nothing revolutionary to say. Even when today's socially motivated emphasis on individualism in style, especially as coupled with a social isolation derived from the ethic of social-political individualism, leaves most artists to argue in a void attended to only by their own élite, while, to complete this socially inflicted self-cooption of freedom, whatever new style becomes, the style is then and there coopted by the commercial sectors of our system. To have come to see that revolution in the sphere of art alone without social revolution has become revolution in a vacuum, and that individual freedom of expression operating aside from full social commitment can be so led astray left us very open for the seeking of a new insight into creativity and a new definition of freedom of expression. For this we knew our trip to China was

S. Marie Carson and her artist husband Douglas Gorsline visited China early last year and had discussions with professional and amateur artists there.

an immense opportunity; to be able to discuss possible ways of the development of creativity in a revolutionary society where social commitment was 'the all' could provide a way of re-focusing of aesthetic standards of expression for us while perhaps, hopefully, giving them some insights which would be of assistance in their efforts. The desired opportunity was amplified beyond our expectations by their overwhelmingly generous implementation of it.

Despite all our preparatory efforts we knew the subject of aesthetics was going to be difficult of approach because of the as yet unbridged gap between our very different socio-cultural formations. So we were extremely fortunate that all we had hoped to discuss was given an excellent framework of points of reference by the exhibition of peasant art which had just opened in Peking as part of the National Exhibition, excellent particularly because of its impact on everyone.

It became clear that the formation of the showing in this way had many implications. The fact that peasant art was chosen for and featured in this National Exhibition, to begin with, indicated recognition of the active participation of, and the need to promote such participation of, the peasants in the national culture—not a new recognition in China but of interest to us. But also it was, we think, a recognition that the art the peasants had produced had something to say culturally as well as socially.

The peasant art was specially selected. While the works of professionals and amateurs (peasant, worker, soldier spare-time painters—self-taught or trained in commune, provincial or district schools—many of whom do propaganda work in the local commune or factory) are recommended from shows selected at city and provincial levels with representatives of city and province deciding what to send, the peasant art was selected from one county. This because the county—Huhsien in Shensi—manifested 'certain good points,

cultural and social, from which others can learn.' The good points specifically spoken of were mainly social: 'Their art production has a broader mass base, more people of more categories participate; many leading members of the county, communes, and brigades paint; men and women, old and young, paint.' The main cultural point was visual and inherent in the work: it was the boldly imaginative quality of the work. Not that the quality and the capacity for it were unique to this county, we saw examples of this capacity wherever we were in China, it is that more individuals were expressing it and expressing it more fully and freely; perhaps in mutual discovery of their creativity they felt free to be bold. In any event much of the work fulfils the desirable synthesis Ernst Fischer called for, 'freedom of the artist's personality in harmony with the collective' and at the same time is made manifest as an expression of the collective. This last accomplishment was one of the cultural points spoken of, the other most mentioned was that the show would inspire other counties and neighbourhoods to make greater effort. We saw it was also inspiring both professional artists and other amateurs to seek and have aesthetic insights.

The history of this movement in Huhsien was socially and culturally important too; it first started in 1958, the year of the Great Leap Forward. The professionals we spoke with told us 'the masses ignited it, it was spontaneous; the problem was that the revisionist line caused setbacks. But in 1964 when the Socialist Education Movement went out to the countryside they started again. They started by painting the history of the villages, of the poor families. It was really only in the Cultural Revolution that painting developed on a greater scale; the county is now in full tide . . . both culturally and agriculturally.'

Finally something special about what they are now doing has import in both realms. Painting in the evening and on

rainy days, teaching and learning from each other in study classes in slack seasons, they are celebrating every facet of their own daily activities: their construction of terraces and wells, their planting and harvesting of their varied crops, their schools, shops, and factories, their community activities from sports to entertainment to speak past bitterness sessions. They depict all with imaginative directness and vitality; the work for this reason is especially useful in the brigade, commune, and county in presenting information and propaganda in a compelling and inspiring way. They have painted their communal past history and their self-reformations; they now are predominantly occupied with celebrating their immediate present; we feel it is an important point that, though they may exaggerate forms, colour or pattern to express it, they find their present actuality inspirational and so does the viewer.

The professional artists and the amateurs working in the traditional skills were outspokenly impressed by the vividness, the liveliness, the inventiveness to be seen in the peasant art and avowed they had a great deal to learn from it. They were aware that the people—those for whom all their work is done—responded to these elements in the work too, which therefore they should seek to incorporate in their own. We discussed the genesis of these elements, along with many other questions relative to our quest, in conferences in Peking, Shanghai, Huhehot and Kweilin with professionals and with amateurs. Everywhere they felt they had the answer as to what made the peasant work 'more alive and innovative'; we felt the implications of their overall answer could lead to a broader, more self-searching dialectic. To them the point was the peasant artists had a deeper sense of content because 'they come from real life and are full of life and healthy ideological feelings', they had 'a better class feeling and fewer ideological problems.' The solution proposed by both profes-

sionals and amateurs was that the professionals improve their ideological selves by going deeper into the masses; this improvement would be reflected in the enrichment of their content and the greater vigour of their style. In Peking they specifically said, 'The peasants cherish the life they are living and painting so cannot refrain from reflecting it . . . they have an active, not passive, attitude . . . in trying to bestow and reflect life, they have created new forms and have boldly broken conventions.'

This statement led us to think of many things; their social commitment led them to consider the ideological problem first, they were concentrating on that in what they said. We avowed that yes, the ideological content was very strong in the peasant art, that we had come to realize what a lack of social commitment had impoverished Western art and that an active social attitude is indeed integral to art. But we continued that we felt, if we further discussed the qualities they had singled out for approbation, the thinking could lead to consideration of other possible ways of raising standards which could be entered into simultaneously with the social one. In discussion, listening to their emphasis on content as one component entity to deal with (for which the peasants received high marks) and on skill (in which area the professionals undeniably have great mastery) the other component and in listening to what they said as to how these two should be wed, we came to feel that some possibilities raised by the peasant art were not being taken up by the professionals or the amateurs because the terms in which the problem was posed did not encompass these possibilities.

We felt what was being overlooked was a full enough consideration of the manner in which the peasant artists painted. Given when both groups painted the world of the peasant the peasant had the greater familiarity with the data and in one way more feeling for it, the social

feeling of the professionals was so high we felt the two groups must be equivalent, if differently so. Mentioning this to one group we pointed out that in that content does not express itself without form there must be something about the form in which the peasants expressed their statements that made their work so effective despite their lack of acquired skill; we thought something they did and/or perhaps something they did not do in regard to form should be considered.

This involved us in a problem which, though it might have been one of equatability of terms in translation, was significant as a point of departure; when we spoke of form or style or manner we were answered in terms of technique or media. Further it seemed that when our sense of form was considered it was felt to comprise and manifest itself in specific techniques which one mastered and turned into skills were set into or set up as a framework of a style which would be one of a series of styles selected as suitable for a given media or content.

It was, we felt, this concept of form as technique-turned-into-skill that led professionals to feel the greatest determining factor for them to consider in their raising of the standard of their art was the quality of their ideological input. This view of form seems to be reinforced in that many of the specific techniques they have had drawn from their own long and rich heritage are conventions which, as such, represent or symbolize specific items of actual or emotional content and which used in various conjunctions, one with another, can be held to make a statement. The prevalence in their art of technique as signifier tends also to lend support to their consideration of their overall solution as correct. This solution at this time could be summarized as follows: while developing their ideological selves to better conceive the content, the best way to master the new revolutionary content and raise their standards of that mastery is by seek-

ing and devising and then perfecting new techniques to depict the wealth of new data and add them within the framework of their style. They then will be raising the level of expression of content by the mastery of accumulation of invented and critically-borrowed-to-be-transformed techniques.

While strongly emphasizing technical skill the artists are totally against formalism, against the use of style or technique for their own sake. Formalism is a form of subjectivism, they pointed out, also making us see that part of the dilemma of Western art is that progress is essayed by the continual opposing of one formalism with (what is or becomes) another formalism without sufficient consideration of the communication of content. Even though to us the emphasis on formal considerations was necessary for the birth of modern art—and we admittedly value that birth highly while they do not—we agree with them that the continuation of such emphasis is a major factor, in interaction with serious social factors, in the alienated quality of contemporary manifestations of that art. The intricacies of this must be developed separately; what is important here is that perhaps the professional artists in China eschew fuller interest in our concept of form too emphatically out of the faults inherent in Western over-emphasis of it; the same situation still pertains to a degree, despite the current stage of the Cultural Revolution, in relation to imaginative individuality in art, perhaps because of the dangers of individualism so evident in the West. Individual points of view are more prevalent in other sectors perhaps because it's easier to advance ideas in sectors wherein ideational innovation is considered for its efficacy in action and not as an ideological statement.

What they hold in contradistinction to formalism and what they are wholeheartedly and totally for is the necessity that art express revolutionary content, and that the artist follow the Mao

Tsetung prescription of a unity of political content with a perfection of art. In their enthusiastic pursuit of this aim, we feel that by their conceptualizing of technique and skill as subsuming and equaling form and by holding to this concept of form in their thinking about the expression of content, they were blocking the avenue to the overall spontaneity, to the inventiveness in the technique, to the innovation in form itself which, all together, is just what they and the masses were responding to in the peasant art. Even in their consideration and nomination of separate visual elements as admirable, their concept of form and the form-content relationship derived from it turned these elements into being only specific technical ones—like word units—to be refined and developed for the statement of content. The selected units served this role well, it is true (i.e. overall pattern expresses bumper harvest, perspective distortions show participation). But to us, they expressed these contents with force in the main because they were part of a coherent whole. Seeing the visual elements as translations of content in terms of sign language oriented the professionals to seeing the peasant artists' contribution in terms of content only. Then while prompting them to admire the peasant artists' innovations within form as content at the same time, this prompted them to see the remaindered side of form as only unskillful technique—so obviating in their eyes the peasants' possible contribution to form. To us, though sometimes in the successful paintings details were unskillfully achieved and could be improved—improved in terms of the form in which they were created even as it develops—as elements of form they complemented the other elements in such a way so that the content pervaded the coherent whole.

To the degree our view is valid, there is information of use-value in how the peasant forms evolved. It would seem

that the peasant artists, not having a learned technique even if they do have access to and influence from a visual tradition, impelled by their statement as the professionals say, they invent as they go along—even breaking visually familiar conventions. Then it is as though in being fully familiar with the life they paint, and in wanting to celebrate it and in having eyes not so constrained by technical considerations, they perforce step aside from and often beyond the problem of trying to fit a statement into a specific framework. This leaves them open to creating a style into which to fit their innovations and this in turn leads to the accomplishment that their feeling pervades the whole painting and to the paintings having a coherent intensity.

This is not, of course, to say that skill, technique, and the discipline of form are not important to the development of art, nor is it to say that inventiveness and spontaneity are the most important elements in art. It's to say that what is important is the matter of the coherent whole—of wedding all into the coherent whole—which calls for an open dynamic concept of form. And it is to say that creativity is not the province only of those with professional skill, it is a property in each of us which can be and needs to be released, and which in the form of insights can directly contribute to the development of art everywhere.

The complexity of the problem of the proper relation between skill and discipline, on the one hand, and inventiveness and spontaneity on the other, was brought out in a paradox, contradictions of which were made clear to us by a statement of one of the professional artists in Peking. In the peasant exhibition we had seen examples showing where peasant artists seeking to raise their level had sought to raise their skill, they did it by emulation of the professional artists' skills. Their later paintings showed they had made considerable progress in this direction year to year, but to our eyes

spontaneity and inventiveness were meanwhile disappearing. Yet when the professional artists, lauding the evident increase in skill, said to us, 'To like peasant art as primitive and to want it not to change is an unhealthy élitist attitude, the peasants do not want to draw inaccurately; it's unhealthy to want them to; it is by error that the proportions are wrong and the limbs mis-set,' we understood he had a point.

Bothered by the contradictions between our concern and this point of view, both of which we felt valid, we were forced to ask ourselves several new questions including: What indeed is the active cultural role of peasant art as 'primitive art'; How much has Western pleasure in 'the primitive' been cultivated by its cooption for profit in the art mart; How much of this is reverse acculturation and on the basis of what seen or sensed values; How can peasant art be sustained in its spirit and functions at the same time the peasant artists are aided to fulfill their wish to raise the level of their skill; How can this last best be done, what insights should be sought for, should some redefinitions be made?

From generalized considerations of these questions as touchstones, leaving specific answers for development elsewhere, our thinking went as follows: The cultural role of peasant art is multifarious, like primitive art it exists as a special cultural record, again like primitive art and also as itself it is a source of mass inspiration and education—including importantly the inspiration of the masses to create, to culturally participate—like other peasant art it is highly germane to the artists' need in the continuing process of development of the source of imaginative innovation in terms of dynamic visual conventions—something to utilize as a source whereby to adapt form to the revolutionary content. But how to best see and use this source was a complex question, one which we could only hope to help be posed so it could be successfully

solved.

We thought a major proposition of this question lay in the values responded to in primitive and peasant art. We summed them up as having to do with ways of making the sensed but unseen, seen with a sense of psychic reality, a sense of experiencing the artist's experience. We felt this was achieved by primitive 'primitives' and untutored peasants by the use of directly meaningful techniques they had had to invent and for which, when successful, they had invented congruous forms suitable to their statement and their technique. Next it had to be considered that 'primitives' become sophisticated and still keep their éclat, their directness, and fullness of communication. How? From our amount of visual knowledge it seemed that as they—and all schools of art down to modern times that produced the new insights into objective reality from which, we feel, art develops—acquired new skills and innovative insights, the combining of these with content forced inventions of form—of new formal relationships—so that form and the techniques within it enhanced each other and made strikingly manifest the content (positive or negative) for which both were invented. The successful peasant art had this directness and these possibilities in it: it could be a source to transform and around which to invent—but with full social considerations—just as primitive and foreign art were a source for Modern Art in the West.

As we felt our way toward this thinking, we felt more and more that if the professional artists would give more consideration to the peasant innovations as technical, as techniques within a form, within a total picture which made them meaningful and to which they gave heightened meaning, they would have vital material with which to deal in two areas in which they were questing. They would not only have a whole panoply of insights as to different ways of making statements which they then could skillful-



A Valley Astir

Chin Chien-feng



On a Tea Plantation



The Last Two Patrons
Chao Hung-wu





Fishing Vessels Set Out from Penglai

Chang Yen-ching



Learning to Drive a Tractor

Chou Jo-chu and Chen Lung



Woman Party Secretary

Lung Ching-lien



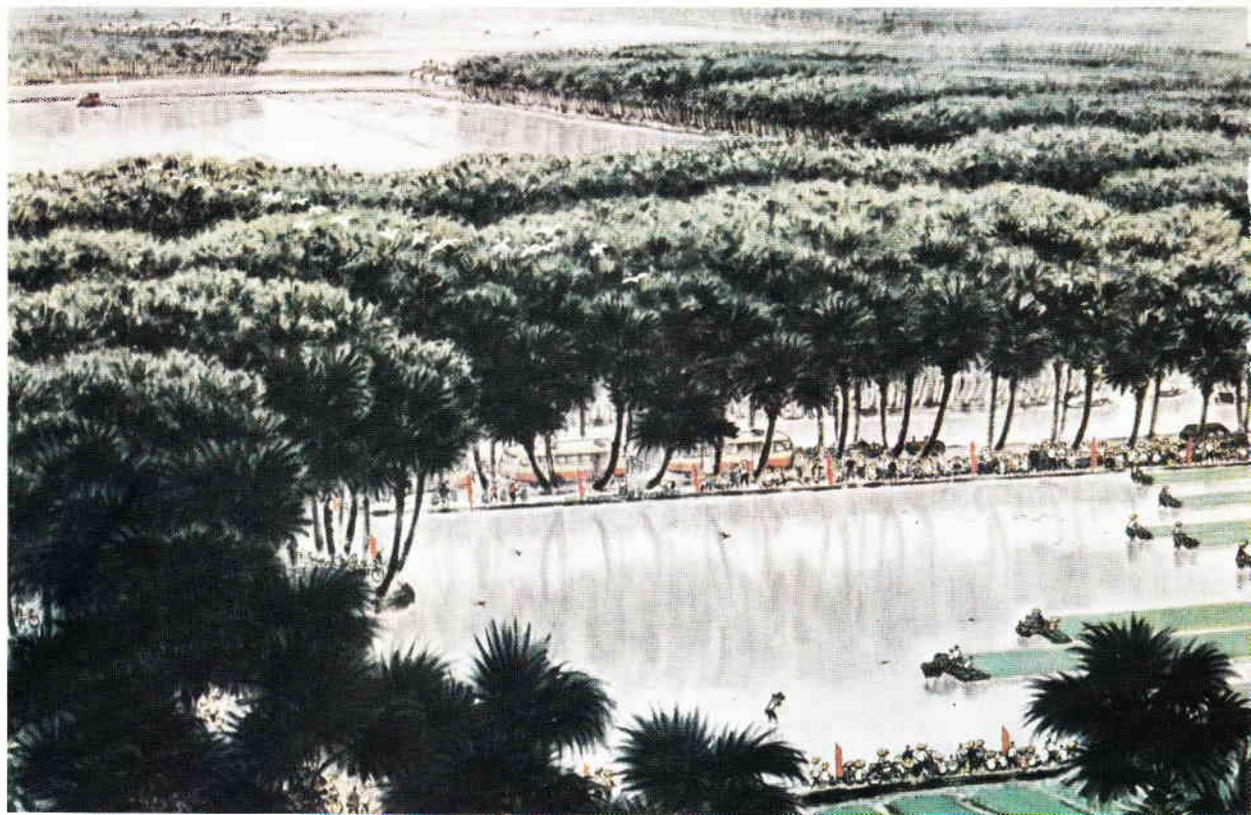
They Embroider Nature



The Doctor Is Here Again *Chou T*

Catching up with Time

Li Yeh-ping and Yen Sheng





a-chen and Lin Chun-lung



Octolateral Tower in the Chingfang Mountains

Sung Wen-chih



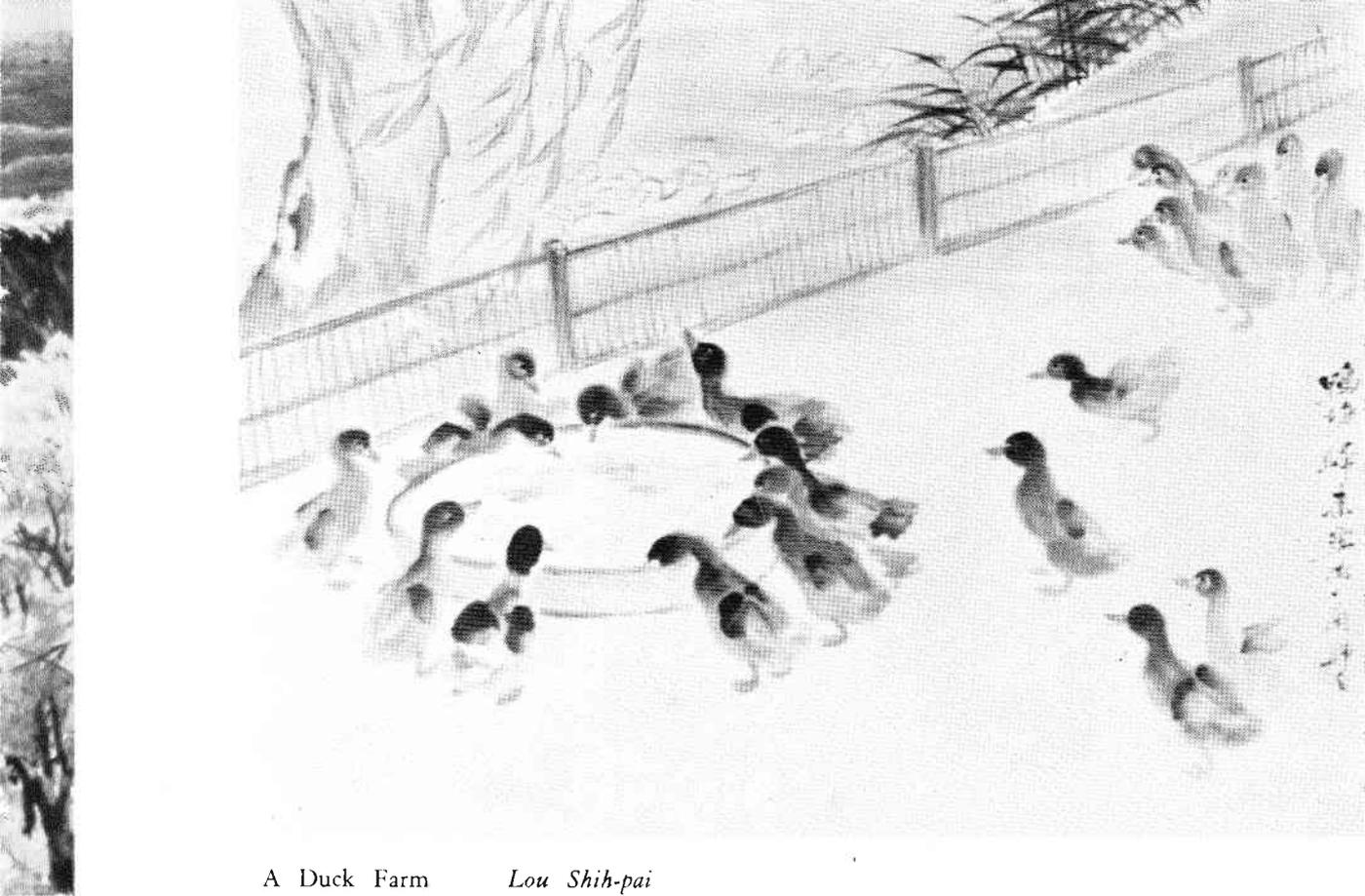
A Great Wall in Green *Kuan Shan-yueh*



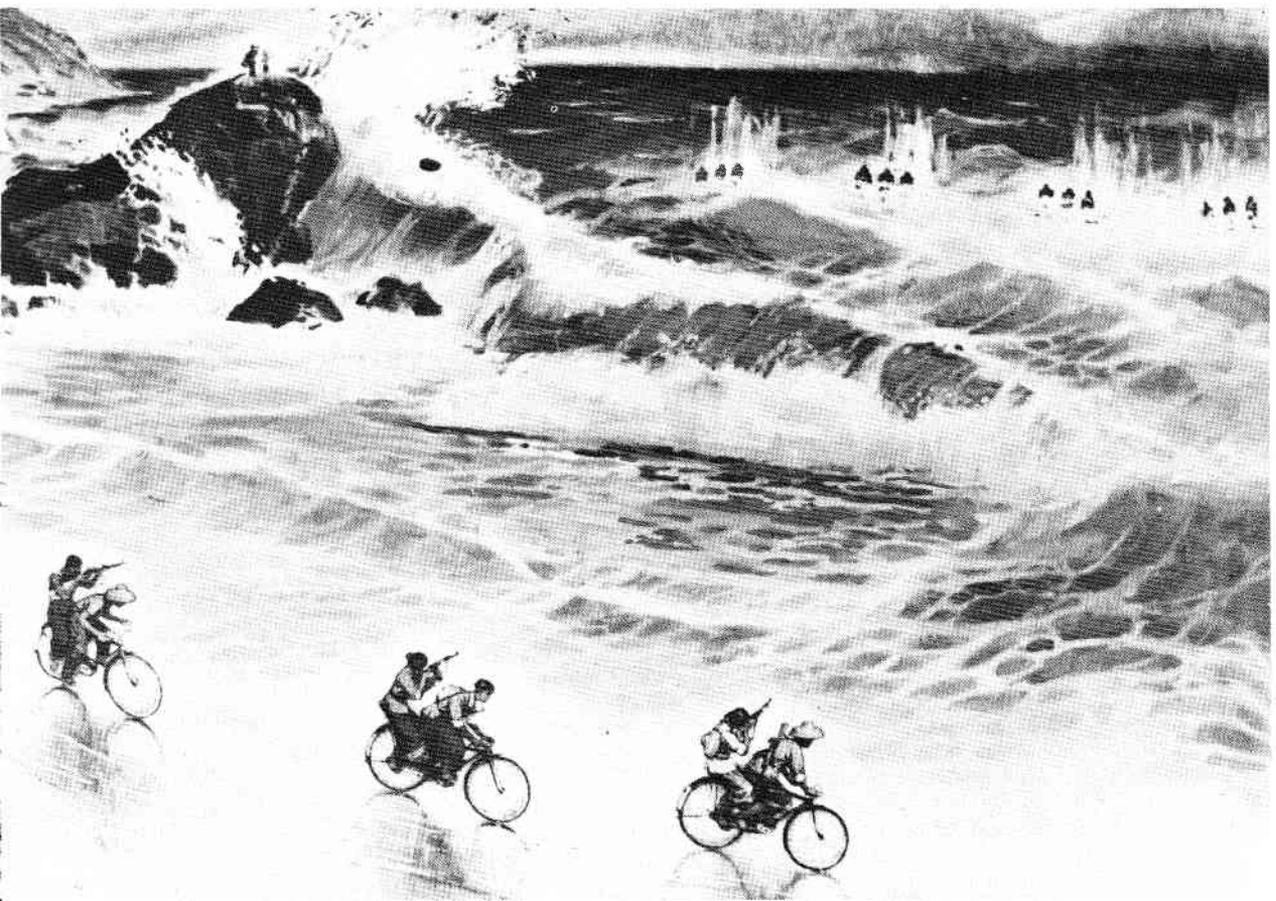
Voluntary Bicycle Caretaker *Hou Chieh and Yen Sheng*

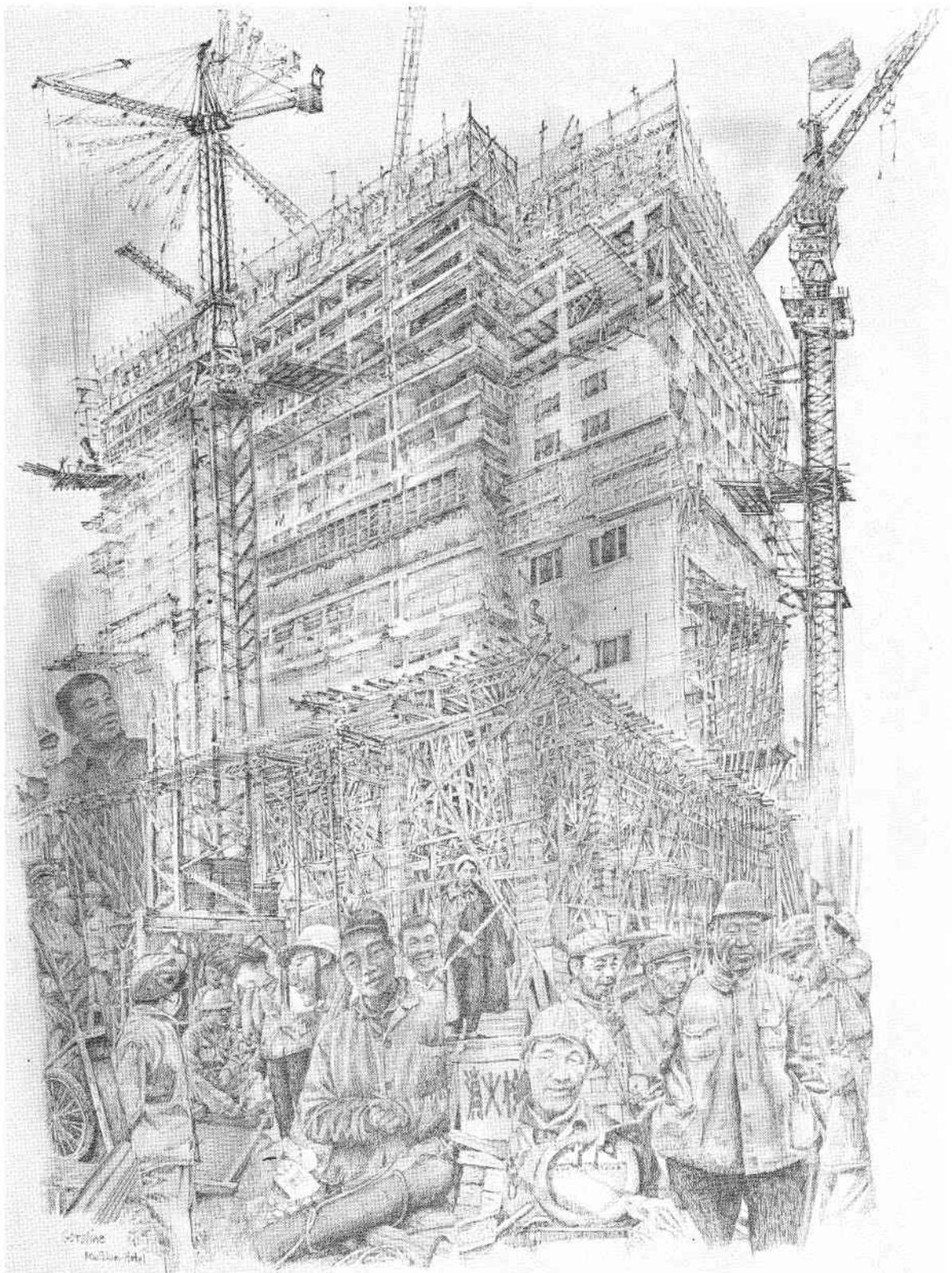


On the South Sea



A Duck Farm *Lou Shih-pai*





Peking Hotel

Douglas Gorsline

ly develop into and employ as their own content-expressive form, but they would have the beginning of an answer to our and their question concerning how best to help the peasant artists raise their standards. As they said, they had been thinking and talking about this among themselves and with the peasant artists since before the Cultural Revolution—there were several programmes in action. The talk about all this gave us a lot to think about.

While underlining the fact that it was a mutually held opinion of the professionals and the peasants that 'the peasant only uses simple and primitive techniques and should raise their standards,' they were intensely aware that there was a real question as to 'in what directions' this should be pursued; they wanted to 'create a situation for 100 flowers to bloom.' Further they made it clear that it was a matter of principle that the 'peasants should raise their skills in their own manner, they can't blindly learn from the specialists.' This certainly lays a genuine

foundation for the fully developed interaction needed between the two groups; they are actively working on that interaction as is being done in every sector of life under the principle of taking everything up and down which, in the way they are doing it, we call back and forth.

The current emphasis by both groups on the necessity of achieving technical skill as primary, while diminishing the value of the peasant artists' innovations in technique and form to the eyes of both groups, and reinforcing the already present feelings of peasants and other amateurs that even should their class feelings be better 'they must look to the professionals for necessary skills and techniques,' can obstruct their efforts to achieve a full generative back and forth regarding the raising of the level of expression in art. Perhaps the two complementary attitudes could be seen as remnants of class contradictions such as people in all fields in China told us of as still existing and necessary to overcome. And perhaps the best way to approach the pro-

(On opposite page)

Drawing of the New Peking Hotel: A suggestion made in theory and carried out in practice.

A suggestion we made in Peking that was considered valid ended in the drawing on the opposite page. We said we felt the professionals were missing a special possibility suggested by the peasant art and also by their own social thought: depiction of the actual life around them in Peking, this too being the active world of the masses. While they were going into the countryside and factories they were not painting their own milieu with which they were so familiar and in which we saw beauty to celebrate—the masses on bicycles at twilight returning from work in Peking, the construction work and workers at the site of the New Peking Hotel. We said we not only thought these were visions of social and aesthetic value, but in painting their own actuality artists would more easily achieve the directness they admired in peasant art and would more likely be inspired to be inventive in form. They agreed this was possible but warned that the subject had to be chosen carefully, that what to celebrate had to be chosen from a social point of view. We felt and said the beauty of what is everywhere here that we see now is important; to us it is a testimony to the beauty and vigour of the socialist life. Douglas decided to make a test of his proposal by painting all that was there at the Peking Hotel construction site.

While at work, we were singularly struck by the self-sufficiency involved, particularly by the derricks constructed from photo reproductions in foreign publications which were made and put in operation even before the drawings to guide their construction were off the drawing boards.

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blem is in terms of class orientation; perhaps such an approach could reveal the next necessary questions. Probably something along these lines is already happening, because, as we were told so often, 'we are still in the process of development.'

And that is a part of the whole marvel of the People's Republic of China. Everything, everywhere, is in the process of active development. Among all else, the professionals' reaction to the peasant art, their seeking for processes to raise their own standards and to aid the non-professionals to raise theirs, are all in process—just as is the building of a responsive representative cultural administration from the provincial level on up.

It is a very hard task, the raising of aesthetic standards, especially on a group level. And that is more the question than the one we all think of in the West—the ideological one—that creativity cannot develop under ideological constraint. We all create under ideological constraints whether they are primarily self- or socially imposed and all our acts and decisions are ultimately political and politically formed, even when we mean them to be a-political. While many of us are not aware of our most active formative ideo-

logical constraints, their main ideological imperatives are directly stated, discussed, and agreed to; the agreed upon constraint in the cultural domain is to create for the workers, peasants and soldiers in a way responsive to them and extolling of their work; this is a large but not impossible commission—it's a matter of finding the most creative way to achieve the aim.

There is a lot more to be discussed. But their aim, their unceasing efforts, their constant self-criticism, their willingness to listen to critical suggestions from outside provide a marvelous climate for both discussion and achievement. It was a privilege to be able to start the dialogue and an excitement to hear, and hear about, our first suggestions being discussed. There were and are gaps in comprehension to bridge, but the dialogue has begun. We hope it will continue and that many others will participate; we will continue by writing, we feel compelled to by what was said in their farewells as summed up in one: 'We are colleagues, we must help each other, we are glad for such an exchange; it was necessary it be started; through dialogue we can raise all artists' standards and strengthen friendship everywhere.'

