

# Painters in China Today

Han Suyin

X is a painter who incurred the displeasure of Chiang Ching about three years ago, by painting a bird which she denounced as 'lugubrious and cynical'. She deemed it insulting to herself and 'who insults me insults the Party.' This was the way she proceeded to harass and persecute all those she did not like; and since she seems to have had a persecution complex, no one knew when she would fix a baleful eye on a person and declare loudly: 'This is not a good person.' Upon which, immediately, the unlucky man or woman was harassed by an 'investigation team.'

So X was held in custody, not in a jail, but in a room in the Art Institute where he taught

painting, while the investigation team interrogated him. 'Why did you paint this bird? What was your hidden intention? Who instigated you to paint this bird?' 'They were always looking for someone behind the scenes,' says X. 'They wanted us to denounce someone higher up; and by that they meant one of the old, able administrators around Chou En-lai. The Gang of Four's campaign in art and literature, which devastated these sectors in the last five years, were really aimed at denouncing Chou En-lai and the older cadres, especially the Long Marchers, as 'capitalist roaders'.

'But my friends all stuck by me. They

---

However, his real task was to return to Peking with a 'poem reportage', a term he had racked his brain to coin. The word 'reportage' would vouch for the 'truth' of what he wrote, whilst 'poem' would give the author a great deal of licence. The result was a sickening adulation of Chiang Ching. A photograph taken by Chiang and reproduced on a calender became a 'silent order' and a 'spiritual atom bomb' which a captain gazed at for encouragement before he gave the order: 'Fire!' and which inspired his men to disregard all perils. There was also a sea breeze which brought a resounding voice bidding the men to 'throw out all invaders'—a remark said to have been made by Chiang Ching some four years ago when she visited Hainan. The 'poem reportage', was dragged out into almost a thousand lines, published in newspapers and printed in beautifully bound pamphlets to be circulated inside and outside China. Had it not been for the serious nature of what the Gang of Four set out to achieve, the whole episode, including the 'poem reportage', could have been treated as a bad joke.

## *The Feng Qing*

On May Day 1974 the 10,000-ton freighter Feng Qing, built at a Shanghai shipyard, sailed for Europe. Her 32,000-mile voyage took her across the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans

before she returned to Shanghai 150 days later on the eve of China's National Day. This was not the first time that a 10,000-tons class ship built in China had crossed the oceans. For two years such ships had sailed across the seas to Canada and West Africa, yet the Gang of Four had shown not a single trace of interest in them. Nevertheless, when the Feng Qing returned, Chang Chun-chiao ordered there to be a rousing welcome and lengthy stories in the newspapers. One did not have to look very far for the motivation of this sudden enthusiasm. The press was full of stories blowing up certain differences the shipping company had had with the shipyard, slandering the former for 'worshipping foreign things', and at the same time hinting there were very important people behind the shipping company. It was then that the Fourth National People's Congress was about to be convened. Obviously to bag most of the important posts, the Gang of Four had decided they needed something which they could throw at Premier Chou and his faithful lieutenants, and the Feng Qing was precisely that. But as it turned out, in spite of all the dust they had kicked up, they failed miserably to blind any one.

Lee Tsung-ying

(To be continued in our next issue)

never abandoned me. "Don't give in, don't agree that you had evil intent; stick it out," they whispered to me. At the time we all whispered, we didn't dare to speak out loud, as if all walls had ears; we were so terrorized.'

After six weeks of harassment the news of this arbitrary detention came to Chou En-lai, already in hospital, very ill with cancer. He gave orders immediately, and X was released to return home. But meanwhile X's wife and child had lost the small house they occupied and were relegated, in the same compound, to two tiny rooms which had been used for storage. The two rooms were 3 yards by 3, and 2 yards by 3 yards, respectively. They were windowless, airless, and there was no toilet, bathroom, or kitchen. To cook, his wife had to stand outside in the courtyard, in the bitter cold, over a small earth stove. To use the toilet, they had to go to the public conveniences in the street. . . . They had to keep the electric light on all day, to see in the dark hovel they now lived in. Their bed filled one room; in the other they ate and lived, and X went on painting. 'You can't paint in that hole,' the investigators gloated. 'But I proved them wrong,' says X. 'I pinned my paper to the wall, and painted and painted.' To prove it he unrolls a huge, magnificent scroll of painting; it is five feet tall and 18 feet long. 'I painted it segment by segment, standing up.' And this is only one of many such paintings he did in the hovel. 'The Gang of Four, Chiang Ching and the three men who were with her, were cowards,' says X. 'I didn't bow down to their bullying. And all my friends came. They had to stand in the courtyard, queuing up to see me, for I could not admit in this tiny space more than two at a time, and we were crowded then.' For four years, X endured this discomfort. 'None of my friends gave me up. And the four did not dare to order them not to come to see me.'

Y is another classical painter; his mountains and river landscapes are famous. He painted an eagle over a stream, and was accused of painting symbolically 'a return of the bourgeoisie.' He was blacklisted, along with so many other painters. His works could not be found nor reproduced. At the famous shop of Jung Pao Chai, which has specialized, for over two centuries, in the exact reproduction of famous originals (and the reproductions are so good that it is almost impossible to tell them apart from the original works—except that the price is very low) people came in

vain asking for these painters. Like X, Y accumulated paintings at home, and hid them by giving them away to friends and acquaintances. For in China's system painters give away, generously, their paintings, never asking for any money. It must be said that all artists, since the revolution, are on a salary basis, and painters too. Although the 'Gang of Four' proceeded to cut their salaries while 'investigation' was on, this was stopped, again by Chou En-lai, who insisted that salaries must be paid, for 'no family must suffer.'

'When I painted, they criticized my paintings as reactionary. I did not paint, and then they came to ask me why I did not paint.' So Y went sick with 'heart trouble and high blood pressure.' The hospitals in China harboured a great many artists and older cadres, whom kindly doctors found variously afflicted with obscure diseases. . . . Since medical care is free, they went there. 'When the four were arrested, the hospitals emptied in a day.'

'On October 7 four of my friends came to see me,' says another painter, Z. 'They stood outside, and whispered in my ear: "They've been nabbed." I could not believe it; I went to take a drink of wine and my wife said: "Why do you drink in the early morning?" "Let us go and take a walk," I said. In the street I whispered the news to her. Then we held hands for a long while, hoping, hoping. . . "Let us go and buy some wine, in case it is true," my wife said. But when we got to the wine shop there was a huge queue; workers, small employees, everyone was buying wine. Then we knew it was true. In a day, all the wine stores were empty. Nobody spoke, but everyone was smiling; and people who did not know each other looked into each other's eyes and shook hands.'

Today these painters, some of them world famous, have been restored to dignity, respect; X has a big, light studio; his works are coming out of oblivion, out of cupboards and hidden places. Despite the 'White terror' practised by the Gang of Four, no painter turned on his colleagues to denounce them; I have not heard of any. It is not the case, alas, among writers. At least one poet used to go weekly to Chiang Ching, to 'report' on his fellow-poets and writers. 'He hoped to become a Vice-Minister; a good many young, ignorant people were promised great jobs if they denounced their elders.'

I have spent the last two months not only interviewing famous professional painters, but



Han Suyin (extreme right) interviewing in Peking Huang Chou (third from left), and faculty members and students of the Central School of Fine Arts.

also going to factories and villages to see painting done there. For it is not true that it is the Chinese revolution which suppressed painting in China. It is quite the opposite.

In 1949, when Liberation came, the professional painters in China were leading lives of great misery, barely surviving through the sale of their paintings. Then at Liberation all artists—painters, writers, musicians—for the first time knew security. They were all put on pay, to assure their material existence. They also enjoyed all-expenses-paid travel to collect material for their work, and from the start Chou En-lai gave special attention to them. It was Chou who gathered a great many works of art to adorn public buildings, hotels, etc. 'But the Gang of Four hated him, they removed the paintings he had selected for a hotel; they criticized other major paintings, even those that Chairman Mao liked particularly, as 'revisionist'. 'Actually Premier Chou was the man who understood and carried out intelligently Mao's policies towards the intelligentsia, scientists and artists.' Many painters told me how Chou saw them per-

sonally, encouraged them to travel and to go among the people, the workers in the factories and the peasants, to see the transformations taking place in China. Mao's general directive 'Art must serve the people, the peasants, the workers, the soldiers' did *not* mean the stunting of art, but an expanded art. After all, Chinese painting had suffered quite a serious decline before the revolution, it had become repetitive and without content. However, just before the revolution, some major painters had been evolving new techniques; and after the revolution, Chou encouraged them to get away from the superficial and the mechanical. 'Chinese classical painting was capable of great expansion and development, and Chou En-lai saw it.' He activated the expansion of art academies. This 'modernization' did not go without, at first, some awkward experiments. 'We got some ill-balanced paintings, an old-style landscape with a tractor right in the middle of it,' says one artist. But in the first 15 years after Liberation; some excellent works did emerge.

Out of this wise policy came a massive de-

velopment of painting in China, especially at the Great Leap Forward of 1958. It was then that peasants and workers started painting, and drawing. Every factory set up blackboards, on which workers drew in chalk. But soon they were drawing on paper. Whole villages started painting in the fire and enthusiasm of the Great Leap, painting on the walls of houses, anywhere. This gave rise, for instance, to the excellent peasant paintings of Huhsien, of which a sample of eighty works have now toured Europe and are touring Canada, awakening great interest by their high quality.

It was in 1958 that professional painters and art academy teachers started classes in painting and drawing for the peasants and the workers. 'I only had a week of teaching,' says to me Li Feng-lan, a peasant woman painter, who continues to live in her poor peasant house, hoes the fields, and paints on village walls in her spare time. (Her paintings have received wide acclaim in Paris.) 'But of course we never kept our paintings; we did them in the course of our great movements to improve agriculture, and we rubbed them off every six months and painted new ones.' In a society which is *not* money-minded, there is no monetary value attached to such paintings. 'We can always paint new ones,' say the peasants, laughing. This enormous creativity, this talent, is one of the wonders of China's people; but I, personally, wish more of their works had been kept.

In every factory in China today, there is a 'cultural centre', more or less well developed. In a precision instruments factory in Sian, there are 45 full-fledged worker-painters, whose works have been exhibited, and who also operate an art magazine, a newspaper, a literary magazine, all within the factory, but much relished by the city's people. In the shipbuilding yards of Shanghai, I saw three workers sketching in the middle of the machinery. Here again, much of the work has not been kept. But among the paintings I saw, great skill and a quality of fresh vitality is maintained. However, there is a very big difference between worker painting and peasant painting; worker painting seems afflicted by a ponderous display of muscular men and women, all wearing a big, toothy smile. I think it has to do with the idea of 'heroism'. The working class, in a socialist society, is the leading class; and hence, instead of a normal flow of the painter's view of the world, there is a determination to depict

worker types a bit larger than life. But it is in massive group paintings that the workers are at their best, and I have collected one or two remarkable pieces.

This is what the Chinese revolution did; make art, music, painting, writing, not the privilege of the few, but something normal, a creative expression of the many. Incidentally, no one in China has ever heard of 'socialist realism' in painting. Under the remarkable Chou En-lai—who seems to have had time for everything and everyone, except himself, for he worked until too ill to stand up—Chinese painting was flexible enough to absorb the new, utilizing the wonderful, century-old techniques of this magnificent art; to produce not only landscape, birds and flowers, but also truly modern painting, and in many original ways. The only thing that was frowned upon was abstract painting.

\*

Then came the 'White terror' or 'the Plague'. These are some of the names given to the Gang of Four—Chiang Ching and the three men who, with her, in their lust for power, almost wrecked China's industry, education, and art.

'They continued where that fascist, Lin Piao, had begun, with violence that we had never seen before, and which was directly against Mao's policies,' says to me the famous painter Kuan Shan-yueh.

Instead of the general directives of Mao, that art must reflect the transformations of socialism, and be for the people, they issued 'art directives' as absolute rules. There must be more political content to the paintings, they said. They held, in 1974, an exhibition of 'black paintings', that is, paintings they labelled 'counter-revolutionary, revisionist, capitalist-roading art,' and most of the renowned painters then came under the black list. But the blight also spread to the factories and to the communes.

'They almost destroyed, within the last ten years, folk art in China,' says the head of a handicrafts factory. 'Fortunately, we saved samples from the past.' 'There has been no proletarian art of any kind between the creation of the *Internationale* and the day that Chiang Ching started the new operas,' screamed Yao Wen-yuan, Chang Chun-chiao, and Wang Hung-wen, Chiang Ching's three helpers.

'They negated all art, all creation, everything between 1870 and the advent of Chiang Ching,' say the old painters.

Nobody in China denies that Chinese opera had to be renovated; but what everyone says is that Chiang Ching utilized her part in this renovation to manufacture her own tyranny, and destroy everyone and anyone who did not pander to her and her views.

The blight affected the factory cultural centres. As a result, all art became poster art, but of the soviet type. Herculean workers with enormous biceps and bulging eyes (very un-Chinese looking) wield torches in white-gloved hands. Buxom girls stand pressing pamphlets (issued by the Gang of Four) to their rounded tunics. 'We had to denounce capitalist roaders in our paintings. The capitalist roaders *must be* the older cadres, the seasoned Long Marchers, the members of the Central Committee and the politburo whom the Gang of Four had on their lists to kill off; and it was all designed against Chou En-lai.' This is what the workers say. No wonder that, when the Gang of Four were arrested, the workers were among the first in China to draw funny, witty cartoons, some of the best I have seen. A new art form, the political cartoon, has suddenly burst forth everywhere in China; exhibitions of these have been held; and I understand the best will be kept as works of art.

Even peasant painting was affected. I spent two days visiting Huhsien, the village of paint-

ers, and other surrounding villages (there are over 800 peasant painters in that one county of 400,000 people). The last pieces, done under the directives of the four, show a serious decline in artistic expression. 'They told us to draw only denunciation of high capitalist roaders. We had never seen a high capitalist roader, what he looked like. We didn't know what to draw.'

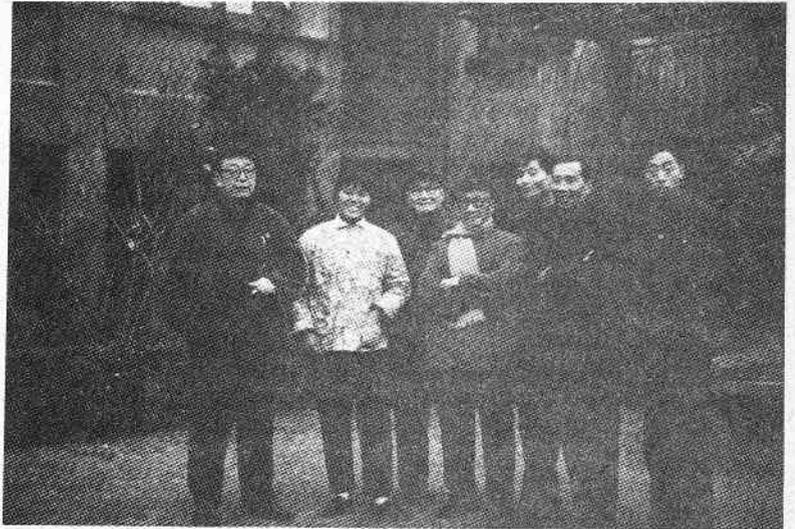
The professional and traditional painters fill in the picture. 'The Gang of Four said painting must not only be a denunciation of capitalist roaders, but contain: *three peaks, or three high points*. These were: Painting must be of positive characters only. Of heroic positive characters only. Of important heroic characters only.

'This meant the end of Chinese painting as an art,' says to me the eminent painter Lin Feng-mien, whose works are prized in the West. 'It negated two thousand years of Chinese painting, of landscape, birds, flowers, that lovely flow of the land and its people which has delighted so many. Chiang Ching denounced *all* paintings which Chou En-lai had encouraged, even the enormous painting: *See How Beautiful China Is*, done by two famous painters, and highly appreciated by Mao Tsetung (the painting hangs in the Great Hall of the People).'

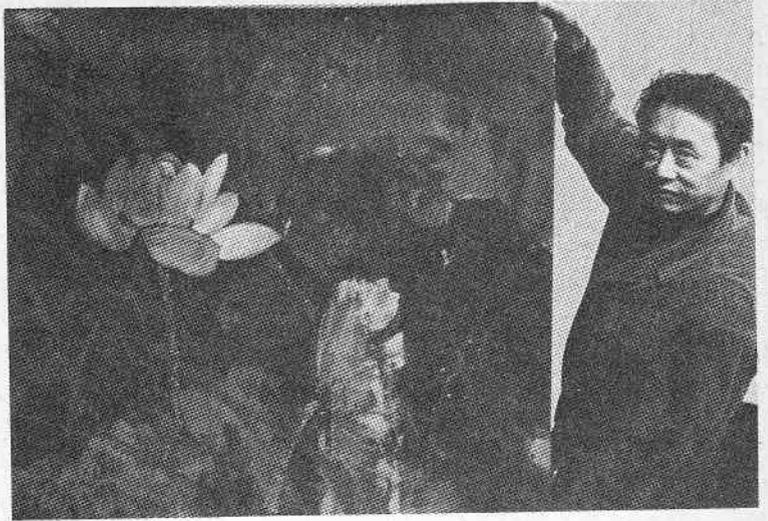
'I couldn't paint a thing,' says Tang Yun, aged 76, a talented old painter. 'How does one paint a positive bird, a heroic important flower?' This meant, actually, only paintings



Painter Kuan Shan-yueh in Kwangchow.



(From left to right in front) Tang Yu; Tsao Hsiu-wen, peasant painter; Lin Feng-mien, well-known artist; Shen Jo-chien, and an unidentified worker painter. The two in the back are Kuan Liang (left) and another unidentified worker painter.



Huang Yung-yu showing how he was able to complete this huge painting of lotus in his small room.



Huang Chou with his painting of an old man from Sinkiang.

of the Gang of Four itself, and of their followers. Nothing else.'

'I couldn't do any woodcuts,' says Shen Jo-chieh, whose woodcuts are highly valued in Japan. 'Every woodcut had to show a "positive, heroic character", denouncing a "capitalist roader".'

The academies of Chinese painting in Canton and in Peking were closed down as 'suspect. . . for investigation.' Kuan Liang, another famous artist, who drew and painted scenes from the old operas, was persecuted. He had painted the famous Monkey-God beating down a devil, the white-boned witch. Today, all over China, Chiang Ching is called the white-boned witch, and figurines of the monkey beating her down are on sale to the great delight of children.

Perhaps because he had drawn magpies, Chiang Ching, who always thought people were talking about her (and they were), black-listed and isolated the eminent painter Lin Feng-mien. 'Now no one comes to see you,' gloated one of Chiang Ching's followers. 'You are wrong,' the painter replied. 'My Lady Colour comes to see me every day.'

Huang Chou, a young and lively painter, went to Sinkiang and painted the wild asses roaming the desert. For this he was called anti-Party. . . the four saw in the asses an

allusion to themselves.

The famous Li Ke-jan, now 70, perhaps one of China's greatest painters, says: 'They tried to destroy all Chinese painting. Chinese painting is based on the use of black ink. "No one must use black in any painting," the four laid down.' In the art academy where he taught, they turned the students against the teachers. They also turned the amateur worker and peasant artists against the professionals who came to teach them. They said: 'There is no need for the young to practise.' Li's paintings of rocks and mountains were banned because 'no rocks must be shown when painting mountains,' and 'there must be no rain landscapes.' Yet rocks, rain, form an essential part of Chinese painting.

Today the plague is over; the academies re-opened; the young crowd round to learn basic techniques of Chinese painting; and the shop of Yung Pao Chai is filled with workers and peasants, clamouring to look at paintings. Major exhibitions will be held, in the spirit of the wide opening in the world of art.

'Perhaps this last tyranny, which the people have rejected with such open loathing, has been good,' says Kuan Shan-yueh, twinkling with happiness. 'We have become integrated with our people, and know how to serve them, in the best way. And now they want good painting, and they have good taste.'

# Chinese Paintings Today



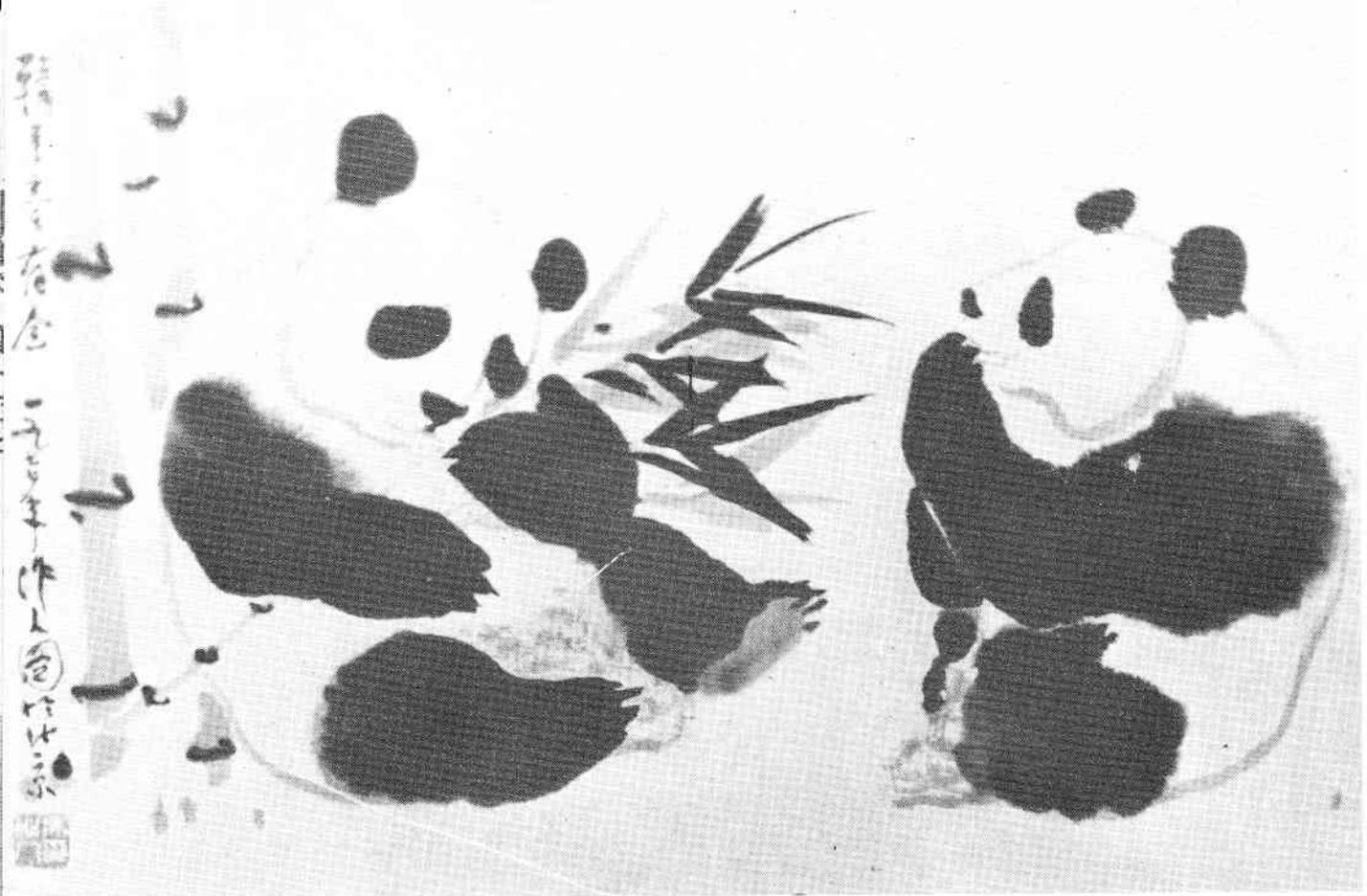
Harbinger of Spring *Kuan Shan-yueh*



*Huang Yung-yu*

*Lin Feng-mien*

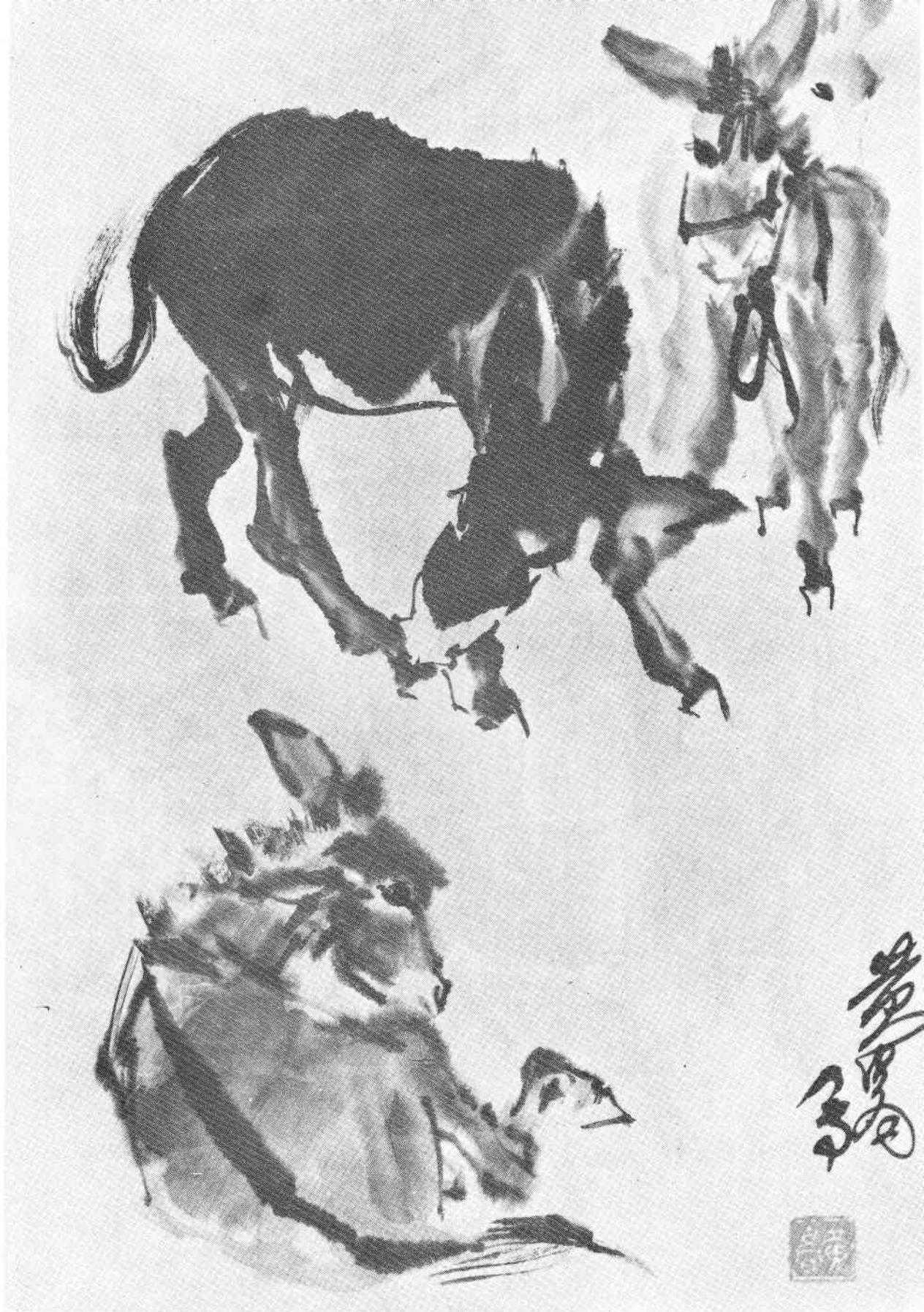




Giant Pandas      *Wu Tso-jen*

Picturesque Yangshuo      *Li Ko-jan*





Donkeys *Huang Chou*



Plum Blossoms Village

*Li Ko-jan*