

Void in Silhouette: On Three Paintings by Tseng Yu-ho

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INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the Chinese-American artist and art historian Tseng Yu-ho (1925-2017), also known as Betty Ecke, looked back at a career that had spanned more than forty years:

Strongly influenced by 20th century logic, I cannot adhere to the frame of mind of a 19th-century Chinese literati painter. After studying much Western wisdom, I have found that East and West share many cultural inclinations. Today what is labeled “modern art” has opened up cultural frontiers. It has absorbed many Asian art techniques as well as the aesthetics of primitive art. Like the economic, political and social world, art today is a global affair.¹

That Tseng would describe contemporary art as “a global affair” seems highly visionary in retrospect. Her expressed interest in exchanges between diverse cultural traditions—including “Chinese,” “Western,” and “Asian” artforms—was less prevalent in the nineties that it is today. Such exchanges had social and artistic roots in both her personal life and her career. A native of Beijing, Tseng Yu-ho spent much of her life in Hawaii, a place noted for the intermingling of multiple ethnic groups. Apart from settling in Hawaii, Tseng travelled extensively in Europe, North America, and East Asia. Her year-long stay in Europe and her encounters with veterans of the School of Paris in 1957 helped her to develop one of her most innovative techniques, *zhuihua* 綴画, literally meaning “patchwork painting.” The semi-abstract, assembled paintings that resulted from her applications of the technique, attested to her participation in the modern art world at the same time that she remained self-consciously connected to the Chinese tradition.

Providing a coherent narrative of Tseng Yu-ho’s career can be difficult, given the fact that her life and work involve multiple scales of operation, whether it be Chinese, Asian or American. Recent scholarship on Tseng is scarce. Most studies of her work focus on the 1980s,

¹ Tseng Yu-ho, “Dsui Hua,” in *Dsui Hua: Tseng Yuho* (Taipei and Hong Kong: Hanart Gallery, 1992): 35.

90s, and early 2000s. Her own scholarly writings span the period from the 50s to the late 90s, with her research ranging from Wu School literati artists to modern Asian art. She also studied European and American art, which enabled her to explore formal and conceptual issues integral to her development as an artist.

This thesis examines Tseng Yu-ho's artistic career over roughly two decades, from 1944 to 1965. This is a period during which Tseng experienced drastic changes of a personal nature, traces of which can be seen in her artwork. Structurally, the present study is organized into three parts, each of which will focus on a single artwork. Part One examines the landscape paintings that resulted from the artist's visit to several scenic attractions near Yuanming Yuan (the Old Summer Palace) in the autumn of 1944. Tseng worked at the time as an assistant to the painter Prince Pu Quan (b. 1912) and to the German art historian, Gustav Ecke, who taught at Furen University. The leading Chinese artists of the period were busy combining what they saw as Western styles with Chinese techniques. Tseng, in contrast, worked in a highly traditional approach to landscape painting, while at the same time adapting it to suit her own purposes.

In Part Two, the setting shifts to Hawaii, where Tseng and Ecke moved in 1949 to escape the struggle between Communists and Nationalists in China. Centering on her 1955 work, *Hawaiian Landscape*, the objective is to analyze the interplay between the depicted scene and the patterns of fragmentation and indistinctness, of concreteness and void, that traverse the picture's surface. Tseng spoke of the difficulties of living through the dramatic socio-political transformations that took place in both China and Hawaii, and it is one of the arguments of this study that *Hawaiian Landscape* bears the traces of a painful and de-naturalized performance of self. It will become clear, in both her art and her scholarship, that Tseng's shifting identity involved multiple temporalities, cross-cultural communication, and a rewriting of history.

Part Three addresses Tseng's early *zhuihua* phase, focusing on one of her early modernist works, *Ascent of a Forest* (1958). The discussion undertakes a formal analysis of the picture as well as the artist's own writing, including a cross-examination of contemporary European-American artistic developments. Like traditional literati painting, the process of layering and assembling provides a material record of the artists' actions and decisions. *Ascent of a Forest*, then, no longer requires interpretive "reading," and calls instead for contemplation. Tseng makes the viewer aware that s/he has encountered an artwork that requires input from the viewer to become complete. The work's non-specificity eschews literal representation, for *zhuihua* is deployed to tease the viewer's imagination with suggestion rather than denotation.

Tseng also engaged with a Chinese critical concept called *xushi* 虚实 (emptiness and substance), in which unpainted areas were meant to suggest, but not define content—again leaving the final interpretation up to the viewer. What is seen and unseen, spoken and unspoken in Tseng's work therefore resonated with the notion of negative space as the term was used at that time. Employing a language of abstraction, consisting of brushwork, ink, and exposed surface interacting in a subdued color scheme, the artist allowed her work to take on a duality that was grounded in materiality but at the same time silently referenced a variety of other things.

The interplay between the objective world and the artist's interiority informs both the landscape paintings and the *zhuihua* work, and it produces a significant ambiguity that defies identification as "Chinese-ness." As an artist and art historian who crossed multiple boundaries and wore her cultural hybridity with pride, Tseng makes a good case study for understanding how Chinese diaspora artists adapted to the artistic scene in America.

PART ONE

China in Ruins: A Visit to the Old Summer Palace in 1944

On the last leaf of an album called *Sceneries near the Old Summer Palace* (1944), Tseng Yu-ho provides an account of the circumstances around the creation of this work (Fig.1-12):

On an autumn day in 1944, we gathered at the Western suburb of the capital. Gaoliang Bridge, Yuanming Yuan (the Old Summer Palace), Fragrant Hill scenes; twelve leaves of natural scenery. With regard to these paintings, I suspect that some scenes will open the eyes of certain viewers.²

甲申秋日集故都西郊。高粱橋圓明園香山諸景，十二慎取自然景。物信筆，
為之頗覺有可會心處。

What she meant by “opening eyes” is not entirely clear. On the one hand, she perhaps imagined viewers capable of understanding her subjective response to the landscape. On the other, she might have imagined viewers capable of reading these paintings in relation to their historical context. This latter set of viewers would presumably have known about the history of Summer Palace, the state of the nation during the Second-Sino Japanese War (1937-1944), and the predilections of the Chinese art world during the thirties and forties.

Consisting of twelve landscapes, the album depicts shifting views from sites near the Old Summer Palace, its various renderings rooted in the literati tradition of Chinese painting. Tseng’s adoption of a traditional approach to landscape paintings, in fact, dominated most of her works in the forties. In explaining the source of her creation, the artist denied identification with the styles of particular artists, “There was no particular old master I painted after. They were more or less the Northern Song style I have known. Nor the poems not after anyone, simply easy lyrics on

² Translation provided by Martin Powers.

landscape[s].”³ Her words shed light on the idea of lyricism in Chinese painting. Confronted with an illusionistic space, the viewer presumably participates in a staged lyricism.⁴ In common usage the word “lyrical” denotes “melodic or poetic,” and refers to the creative expression of artist’s or writer’s emotions. Yet its connotations are more complicated and would require a distinction between different types of viewer. To an untrained eye, the landscapes might seem delicate, harmonious, beautiful, and perhaps “lyrical.” For a knowledgeable observer, the pictures might serve instead as loci for interpretative reading, involving both literal and figurative modes of representation. Such distinctions in the understanding Chinese landscapes were originally rehearsed in the *Book of Centrality and Commonality*, *Zhongyong* 中庸 from the eleventh century. The author carefully underscores the interplay between the seen and the unseen: “There is nothing more visible than what is hidden and nothing more manifest than what is subtle.”⁵ Surface qualities such as textures, brushstroke, handling of ink, in other words, serve as alibis for the underlying tensions and contrasts in the pictorial field. Patterns of partiality, discontinuity, and fragmentation therefore serve both as formal conceits points and as points of access to social and historical determinants outside the pictorial field.

Upon first examining the twelve album leaves, one notes an intimate relationship between the elements in the landscapes and their supporting surface. The second leaf (Fig.1-2) depicts a lakeside wasteland punctuated by groves of weed. The delicate washes, rendered in gradations of brown, orange and light blue, create subtle changes in density as the water bank

³ Tseng Yu-ho, email correspondence with Melissa J. Thompson in her dissertation, “Gathering Jade and Assembling Splendor: The Life and Art of Tseng Yuho” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2001): 52.

⁴ John Hay, “Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface,” *Archives of Asian Art* 38 (Duke University Press, 1985): 112.

⁵ Tu Wei-Ming trans., *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Chung-yung* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1976): 27. Quote in Hay, “Surface and the Chinese Painter,” 109.

recedes into distance. The appearance of a unified vision, however, becomes fragmented in face of separations between the brushwork and the colored washes, resulting in changing tonalities of the landscape. Shifting textures and values of ink, brush and the paper support create fissures in the pictorial field, highlighting the physicality of the surface and at the same time alerting the viewer to the representational artifice at work in the painting. Tseng's presentation of the landscape is limited to some extent the size and format of the album; it is expanded, on the other hand, by the sequential arrangement of the multiple leaves. Moreover, the compact format of each leaf requires that the artist select those portions of a given scene that she considers sufficiently expressive, poetic.⁶ This working method, called *qu* 取 in classical texts on Chinese painting, entails an active picking and choosing of the details at her disposal. The acknowledgment of the infeasibility of rendering a single, complete depiction serves to internalize the distinction between what Tseng actually saw at the site of the Old Summer Palace and what she painted in the twelve leaves.⁷ What the viewer sees in each painting is therefore a combination of partially obscured motifs, the visual elusiveness of which is further complicated by the relationship between each picture and the sequential whole of the album.

I

By selectively incorporating certain elements of the landscape and leaving out others, Tseng interweaves an awareness of a painting's surface qualities with structural staging of the *jing* 景 ("scene"). In discussions of the traditions and conventions in Chinese painting, the relationship between painting and poetry is often highlighted. Through pictorial representations

⁶ Martin Powers, "When Is a Landscape like a Body" in Wen-hsin Yeh ed. *Landscape, Culture and Power in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California): 14.

⁷ Ibid.

of an idealized narrative, the artist maps out a lyrical journey and draws on analogies between visual experience and the literary effects of thematically related Chinese poetry.⁸ The effect of the alignment between painting and poetry is complex, particularly because it involves the coalescence—simultaneously both disruptive and reciprocal—of divergent media. Tseng was surely aware of the lyrical cast of traditional landscape painting, and her representations of motifs near the Old Summer Palace suggest a full understanding of seventeenth-century discourses on both “scene” and on the interplay between brush marks and surface. Under Dong Qichang (1555-1636), the classical emphasis on *xushi* in Chinese painting became re-contextualized in relation to the artist’s growing awareness of the viewing subject. Richard Vinograd, in his investigations of the unique tightness in Dong’s painting, refers to these structural motifs as deliberate strategies of visual delay.⁹ Incoherent spatial configurations and obstructive experiences of viewing serve to undermine the importance of vision in favor of embodiment.¹⁰ By denaturalizing the presumed unity of pictorial space, the artist makes the viewer cognizant of the physicality of the depiction, especially with respect to the material support. The distinction between the experiencing subject and the painted objects is thereby eliminated, as the subject becomes positioned as internal to the object’s surface.¹¹ The conflation of the subject and object transforms the viewer’s perception of the scene and effectuates an overlapping of the viewer’s space and the world the painting.

⁸ James Cahill, *The Lyric Journey: Poetic Painting in China and Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press): 4.

⁹ Richard Vinograd, “Vision and Revision in Seventeenth-century Painting” in Wai-ching Ho, Wai-kam Ho, and Hin-cheung Lovell eds. *Proceedings of the Tung Ch’i-ch’ang International Symposium* (Kansas City: The Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, 1991): 18.16.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Michele Alberto Matteini, “Painting in the Age of Evidential Scholarship (kaozheng): Luo Ping’s Late Years, ca. 1770-1799” (PhD. diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, May 2012): 98.

In *Sceneries near the Old Summer Palace*, Tseng incorporated scenic motifs—trees, mountains, village houses—in an illusory space that openly declares itself as fictive. Enclosed by the horizontal and vertical axes, these landscape elements generate pictorial tensions as the viewer negotiates the distinctions, for example, between foreground and background (Fig. 1-6, 1-7, 1-9). For the viewer, these same tensions, optically irreconcilable, serve to encourage sustained attention. A prolonged visual engagement in turn prompts the viewer to notice the landscapes' micro-structures: each touch of the brush, each stroke, and each ink wash. Attentive viewing was aptly described by Shen Kuo (1029-1093) in a discussion about the paintings of two tenth-century painters Dong Yuan and Juran: "When looked at closely, one seems to see no recognizable objects at all; but when seen from afar, the scenes and objects emerge clearly, arousing deep feelings and distant thoughts."¹² By stressing the different sensations evoked by shifting relations to the surface, Shen alluded to the interplay between micro- and macro-structures. When a landscape is seen close-up, each stroke emphasizes its interaction with the surface by refusing to be regarded as an illusion; when seen far way, the individual strokes give way to more integral landscape imagery.¹³

Tseng's Old Summer Palace landscapes also enact a kind of staged theatricality which, by virtue of the optical perspective around which the pictures are organized, emphasizes the illusionistic quality of both space and structure.¹⁴ By examining the landscapes one after another, the viewer partakes of a lyrical journey through constantly shifting pictorial spaces, each of

¹² Shen Kuo, *Song of Picture*, in *Meng-ch'i pi-t'an*, trans. by Richard Barnhart (based on Chu-tsing Li), "'Marriage of the Lord of the River': A Lost Landscape by Tung Yuan," *Artibus Asiae Supplementum* XXVII (Ascona, 1970): 24-25. Quoted in Hay, 108.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

which consists of illusory landscape motifs that fracture into discrete washes and brushstrokes.¹⁵ To sift through the album's twelve paintings is undergo a revelatory viewing experience in which each scene serves as a fragment in a larger body of images. The scenes consist not only of Tseng's translations of observed motifs, but also of conceptual fragments, anachronistically accessed, of earlier traditions in Chinese landscape painting. These allusions to the past serve the dual purpose of invoking a venerable national tradition and of reminding the viewer of the social and historical circumstances under which Tseng lived and worked in 1940s Beijing. A short account of the history of the Old Summer Palace and its epochal significance during the Second Sino-Japanese War will provide the necessary clues.

II

Built during the reign of Emperor Kangxi (r.1662-1722), the Old Summer Palace was a “veritable paradise on Earth,” according to the French missionary painter Jean Attiret (1702-1768).¹⁶ Deeply impressed by the landscaping around the palace, Father Attiret wrote a glowing account of the imperial garden that was published in English in 1752, at a time when large-scale garden design was considered, in France and England alike, a matter of national pride.¹⁷ Of course gardens, along with palace architecture, were an important means by which to impress foreign dignitaries and to stake claims to artistic authority amidst a climate of international cultural competition.¹⁸ Eugenia Ziroski Jenkins argues that for the English, “China referred

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Young-tsu Wong, *A Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2001): 9.

¹⁷ Jean Denis Attiret, *A Particular Account of the Emperor of China's Gardens near Peking* (London: printed for R. Dodsley and sold by M. Cooper, 1752).

¹⁸ Richard Strassberg, “Culture and International Relations in the 18th Century.” Retrieved from http://chinamirror.net/?page_id=1186.

metonymically to an emergent notion of the global, something in relation to which England is situated, and by which Englishness must be measured and tested.”¹⁹ As England’s international influence expanded during the 18th century, so did its claims to intellectual superiority to China, including in the field of garden design.²⁰ This competition with China would not soon be forgotten or forgiven. When, in the mid-nineteenth century, treaty negotiations with the Qing government failed, the English took military action against the Chinese. In October 1860, the Old Summer Palace was looted and set afire. The ferocity of the plunder and destruction was justified by the English as necessary measure to humble “the haughty Chinese.”²¹ To the Chinese, the almost total destruction of one of the finest examples of the natural garden in the world, left scars that retain political resonance even today.

Tseng’s visit to the grounds of the Old Summer Palace in 1944 would surely have provided a glimpse into a grand imperial past, as well as a stark contrast the war-torn present of the Second Sino-Japanese War. At the site, where imposing architectural remnants still testify to the grandeur of the palace and gardens, she would have come face-to-face with evidence of China’s cultural domination during the eighteenth century. The ruins of the palace and the interconnected gardens may well have served to generate an interplay of memory and history in much the same way as the sites analyzed in Pierra Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* project.²² The remnants of the past retain their capacity for metamorphosis in Nora’s estimation, and generate

¹⁹ Eugenia Zuroska Jenkins, *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 7.

²⁰ Dora Wiebenson, *The Picturesque Garden in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978): 61-62.

²¹ Wong, 158.

²² Pierre Nora. “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 19.

an endless recycling of meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of ramifications.²³ Given her immediate experience of a present determined by Japanese occupation and the ravages of war, the ruins of the Old Summer Palace would have prompted, for Tseng, a similar intermingling of memory and history. The result was not only an engagement with a metamorphosed history of China, but also the development of an understanding of Chinese-ness that would take on renewed, decentering configurations as Tseng established herself as an artist working in the Chinese diaspora.

Tseng's personal experiences during the Second Sino-Japanese War were indeed decentering. By remaining in the capital, the young artist was forced take on multiple jobs to support herself and her household.²⁴ Her family scattered to different areas in China due to the chaos of war political circumstances.²⁵ This is the context that her landscapes, generated in equal measure by a visit to the Old Summer Palace and direct experience of ongoing war, are meant to address. And it is why, in Tseng's album, that her "simple easy lyrics" give way, for the careful viewer, to a complex reflection on history, memory, and identity.

III

The interplay between the album's presumed subject matter, its formal conceits, and its historical circumstances brings us to the problem of the void, namely the "empty" areas that emerge from amidst the painted marks. Instead of appearing as passive or recessive in relation to surface, these areas are to be understood as active agents within the composition.²⁶ More than channeling and pulsing different tensions in the surface, the void serves as an intermediary space

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Thompson, 40.

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

²⁶ Hay, 102.

amidst configurations of brushstrokes and ink washes.²⁷ The space is recognized for the imminence of its appearance and disappearance.²⁸ In *Sceneries near the Old Summer Palace*, such duality is conveyed through pictorial as well as material means. The depiction of landscapes in an autumnal setting, suggested both by the specific season of her visit and the artist's tendency of using gradations of orange and brown as washes, signifies an impending transition: the harshest months of winter are about to come, and wintry, barren landscapes will soon take the place of the more luxuriant features in autumn.

In relation to the landscapes' support, the visible speckles on the paper create a densely congregated field of vision in the unmarked spaces. Close viewing of the painting, in addition, allows one to notice their varying sizes and the production of surface tension as they overlap the painted marks. In some circumstances when the overlapping is more prominent, the speckles produce stoppages along individual strokes, requiring a visual punctuation in the viewing experience. They prolong the interactive duration between the marked and unmarked spaces, as one becomes increasingly conscious of the textual nuances between the paper and the brushwork. Seen from a distance, the speckles seem to dissolve yet at once emerging as soon as the observer tries to ignore them when viewing the scene. The marked and unmarked spaces are therefore equivalent, just as the paired terms of *xu* and *shi* in Chinese art and literature are interlocking and mutually interdependent.²⁹

²⁷ Joan Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters, Worlds: *Tansaekhwa* and the Formation of Contemporary Korean Art," (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts New York University, September 2008): 249.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Jason C. Kuo, "Emptiness-Substance: *Xushi*," in *A Companion to Chinese Art*, edited by Martin J. Powers & Katherine R. Tsiang (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015): 330.

The signification of “empty” spaces functions beyond the interplay between substance and void on the paintings’ surface. One notable aspect of Tseng’s landscapes is the lack of architectural traces. Having been left in neglect since its destruction in 1860, the physical ruins of the imperial garden would have been present when Tseng visited the site in the 1940s. The absence of physical traces in Tseng’s album is not an anomaly. It corresponds to a long-standing pictorial tradition in Chinese paintings, where the presence of the ruin may be alluded to rather than illustrated.³⁰ It thereby becomes necessary to consider other kinds of visual expressions that could invoke the experience of looking back to the past at the sight of ruins is thus necessary to construct the substance-void relationship in *Sceneries*.³¹

The allusion to ruins in Chinese paintings is usually articulated through a variety of visual clues and technical details, such as the representation of a desolate mound of rubble, uncultivated plants, or leafless and twisted trees. Tseng’s approach to the Old Summer Palace ruins is similar. Given that the artist denied identification of her landscapes with specific Northern Song masters in the aforementioned quote, her choice of subject matter (landscape in ruins), stylistic associations, and format (the serial album) in fact associates the work more closely with early-Qing masters, whose works would have been at least familiar to her. The landscape paintings by Shitao (1642-1707) and Gong Xian (1618-1689) would constitute suitable grounds of reference for their formal and compositional resonance as well as their innovative use of emptiness.

³⁰ Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012): 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Both artists lived through the demise of the Ming Dynasty in 1644. The transition from the Ming to the Qing was characterized by dramatic changes in the political, social, and cultural environment. Refusing to serve the new government after the Manchu invasion, Gong Xian chose to seek personal liberation through a life of reclusion, while Shitao became a Buddhist monk. By portraying the willows in their widest and most cultivated state, while undermining traditional spatial expectations, Gong Xian gave new life to a motif with deep historical roots (Fig.2). Under the artist's brush the willow seems relevant of the artist's conflicting experiences in the new dynasty, encompassing "both his self-doubt and pride, his suffering and acceptance of fate, his vainglorious past reputation and truly glorious present virtue."³² Each pair in Silbergeld's view corresponds to the interplay between substance and void as Gong Xian continued to negotiate the tensions between the two through his interaction with the paper surface.

In Shitao's works, memory plays a central role in joining time, place and history. The final leaf in an eight-leaf album, *Reminiscences of Qin-Huai*, depicts Shitao himself, traveling in solitude in a small boat (Fig.3). He stands, raises his head, and searches for traces of the ruins. The concreteness of the mountain slabs in diagonal composition, punctuated by thorns and a few twisted trees, is contrasted with the connotation of the looming void. The artist summed up his encounter with the past in the colophon above: "Along the Qin-Huai with its forty-nine bends/I search for every marvel of the Eight Dynasties."³³ The past is reencountered in the present moment through his recognition of the place as an empty vessel where any memory of previous

³² Jerome Silbergeld, "Kung Hsien's Self Portrait in Willows, with Notes on the Willow in Chinese Painting and Literature," *Artibus Asiae* 42 (1980): 31.

³³ Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 120.

dynasties could be recalled.³⁴ It is therefore within absence and emptiness that memories can be evoked.

Three hundred years later, Tseng conjured up an image of the past at a site of national ruin by making recalling of emptiness adopted by her early-Qing predecessors as an anachronistic citation. In the winter of 1944, she wrote of her conflicting emotions during the Second Sino-Japanese War:

Friend, tell me, why do I suffocate and struggle to breathe,

As if I am dragging a huge heavy iron chain, creeping slowly in a pitch-dark alley?

I want to burst out this pillory yoke to roar thunderously as the tempestuous East wind, to blast the cruel and cold world.

When I turn to look back, I find myself covered in blood, lying in filthy mud.³⁵

The massiveness of the iron chain is contrasted with the free-floating yet tempestuous East wind, suggesting how both served to aggravate her anguish and despair during this tumultuous period. Within the substance the void coexists, and the reversal is also true. Despite the equivalence of the two terms, the void offers more possibilities for memory and discussion

IV

Arguably Tseng's album also serves as a kind of record of her nascent career.³⁶ Her non-aesthetic character associated with her colophon establishes the specificity of the work in time

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Tseng Yu-ho, *Chuantong Zhong de xiandai: Zhongguo hua xuan xinyu* (The Contemporary within the Traditional: Some Contemporary Elements in Classical Chinese art) (Taipei: Dongda tushu, 1996): 125. Translation provided by Melissa Thompson and slightly modified by me.

³⁶ Jonathan Hay, "The Functions of Chinese Painting: Toward a Unified Field Theory," In *Anthropologies of Art*, edited by Mariet Westermann (Clark Institute of Art, 2005): 112.

and site. As a mobile object, the work travels beyond the immediate boundaries of a single place and functions differently in multiple times and places. The post-war years in the forties saw Tseng's emergence onto the international art scene. In 1946, the artist had her first solo exhibition at the Peking Union Medical College, and the show subsequently traveled to London, where it was installed in the China Institute.³⁷ To British eyes, her works appeared as poetic landscapes that called to mind traditional Chinese paintings, devoid of any references to artistic trends then fashionable in Europe and America. The China Institute, moreover, would have prompted a particular set of expectations on the part of British spectators. These expectations, one can imagine, would have corresponded to longstanding assumptions about Chinese art, influenced by Britain's current political circumstances.

Just as the Opium War marked the end of Imperial China's domination in trade, the Second World War witnessed the beginning of the disintegration of British imperial power. The empire would continue to lose colonies and territories, and its prominence in the global political stage was noticeably undermined. In face of the United States' rising international importance, one can imagine that the tangible shift in old balances of power could trigger anxieties among British intellectuals. This anxiety, in addition, may have been accompanied by a sense of nostalgia towards a grand, all-powerful British imperial past. Even though the nation emerged from the war victorious, the destruction resulting from multiple bombings of London erased some of the most venerable buildings and monuments of the past. Feelings of loss and nostalgia in England would have echoed Tseng's depictions of the Old Summer Palace, at once reminiscent of a glorious past and evocative of a broken present.

³⁷ Thompson, 59.

In the British context, the landscapes would have been seen through the lens of British “perceptions” and “misperceptions” of a distant and exotic East Asian culture. What Tseng saw as “lyrical,” therefore, might have been seen differently through British eyes conditioned by an entirely different cultural identity. Tseng’s show in London would subsequently travel to San Francisco, where it was installed at the M.H. de Young Museum in late 1947. Yet another point of encounter was created where divergent cultural traditions could intersect.³⁸

Despite scant press coverage of the London show and the general lack of understanding among British audience, Tseng’s paintings attracted the attention of the eminent art historian Michael Sullivan. As is evident in his early articles, Sullivan used the China Institute in London as an entry point to develop his understanding of contemporary Chinese art, and Tseng’s exhibition was one that most captured his attention.³⁹ By recognizing that Tseng painted in a more traditional manner than that of almost any other living Chinese artists, Sullivan highlights what he called the “performative character” of her work.⁴⁰ Viewed in the British context, these paintings would have resonated with a certain understanding of the artist’s Chinese-ness. Her identity would no longer be singular, but rather national.⁴¹ Sullivan saw the exhibition as an opportunity to provide “a re-appraisal of the state of traditional painting in China to-day [*sic*], at a moment when it would seem that tradition in every field of Chinese life is being thrown overboard.”⁴² Though it is unclear whether Tseng advocated a revival of tradition in her

³⁸ Thompson, 61.

³⁹Michael Sullivan, “The Traditional Trend in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Oriental Art* (Winter 1949-50): 105-110.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Jonathan D. Katz, “Identification,” in *Difference/Indifference: musings on postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, introduction and text by Moira Roth and commentary by Katz (Australia: G+B Arts International, 1998): 55.

⁴² Sullivan, 105.

paintings, Sullivan seemed to have acknowledged their anachronistic character. By understanding that incoherent juxtapositions and tensions took place in traditional painting, the artist turned her own work into an anachronism to be contemplated.

In the eyes of the Communist authorities in China, Tseng's work would have appeared too "bourgeois," because of its indifference to socialist causes. It was within this context that Tseng and Ecke, in 1949, fled Beijing to Xiamen (Amoy), then to Hong Kong, and eventually to Hawaii.⁴³ Their flight from China, however, did little to free Tseng from Communist entanglements. One suspects, in fact, that her interest in subjectivity and identity was heightened through increasingly inventive pictorial languages by way of insisting on the very values that were being suppressed by the authorities in her home country.

⁴³ Thompson, 63-64.

PART TWO

Centrality and Dispersion: Ways of Seeing Hawaii

Tseng and Ecke arrived in Hawaii at a time when the territory was undergoing drastic socio-political changes. The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1944 profoundly impacted the reception of Asian culture on the islands and generated widespread racial paranoia.⁴⁴ Ethnic minority groups, including the Japanese, Chinese, Koreans and Filipinos, searched for ways to assert their position in Hawaiian society.⁴⁵ While respecting their own cultural traditions, minority individuals became increasingly aware of their transcultural identities in the post-World War II era. As an artist who lived and worked in this hybrid world, Tseng was a participant of Hawaii's distinctive social chemistry and cultural pluralism.⁴⁶ Her experimentation with a new approach to landscape painting mirrored how shifting cultural and social boundaries shaped the development of her personal vision and styles.

Among a series of works that Tseng produced in the early 50s, *Hawaiian Landscape* (1955) stands out for its noticeably large size, centrality of composition, and the integration of

⁴⁴ Marcia Morse, "Hybrid Worlds, Singular Visions: Hawaii's Asian Heritage and Art," in *Asian Traditions Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945-1970*, edited by Jeffrey Wechsler (New York: H.N. Abrams in association with the Janes Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 1997): 183.

⁴⁵ The post-war period in Hawaii saw persons of Japanese descent emerging to socio-political prominence. The new generation of Niseis challenged the status quo and effectively broke the Republican hegemony of the territory. Their rise to position prominence both directly and indirectly resulted in the Democratic Party's landslide victory in elections for the territorial legislature in 1954. Known as the Democratic Revolution, the victory brought tangible social and economic changes to the islands that eventually mounted to the passing of the Hawaiian admission Act in 1959. See Eleanor C. Nordyke and Y. Scott Matsumoto, "Japanese in Hawaii: A Historical and Demographic Perspective," *Hawaiian Journal of History* 11 (Honolulu: Hawaiian Historical Society, 1977): 168; and Michael Haas ed., *Multicultural Hawaii: The Fabric of a Multiethnic Society* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1998): 43.

⁴⁶ Morse, 185.

Chinese landscape painting tradition with natural elements indigenous to Hawaii (Fig.4). Here too, the duality of the seen and unseen, the spoken and unspoken, the explicit and implicit, would take on new configurations. The staged areas of silence and void; the tension articulated between the performative assertion of her artistic persona and the demands the picture made on its viewers: these elements would find their most significant expression the concept of *xushi*.

In *Hawaiian Landscape*, the viewer is presented with a large mountain, foregrounded by a line of tropical vegetation. The centrality of composition, enriched by detailed variations in the mountain ridges, appears at once to be both monumental and highly detailed. By using the dotted method of modelling, Tseng translated the concrete reality of the mountain into a two-dimensional surface. The illusion of continuity and three-dimensionality in the pictorial space becomes disjunctive when individual brush marks assert themselves in relation to the surface. Ink textures and tonalities produced by the brushwork actively interweave with the size and quality of the paper. As a medium where ongoing tensions within the pictorial field intersect, paper acts as a converging as well as diverging force. The viewer begins to sense the mountain's centrality beyond questions of representation, even as the texture of the support—heightened by the use of a dry brush—suggests dispersion and obstruction.

An investigation of what lies beyond sight and vision can be found in the *Book of Centrality and Commonality, Zhongyong*:

Centrality, then, is that state of mind wherein one is absolutely unperturbed by outside forces. But it is more than a psychological concept of equilibrium... According to an ancient tradition, certainly antedating the composition of the *Zhong-yong*, man is conceived as that being which embodies the centrality of heaven and earth... In a strict sense, centrality signifies an ontological condition rather than a mental state of quiescence... And it is only to that inner self, “before

the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused,” that the term centrality can adequately be applied.⁴⁷

Rather than a mental state of equilibrium, what centrality suggests is an engagement with the self *before* feelings and emotions are invoked. This emphasis on the suspension of the moment articulates the distance between the visible and the hidden. The inner self, when dissociated from emotional stimulation, thus becomes “visibly” conscious of what is only implicit. Such consciousness inflects her contact with the painting’s surface, giving rise to a set of coded tensions that are decipherable only to the careful observer.

Another notable characteristic of *Hawaiian Landscape* is its sense of cartographic specificity. The side of the mountain almost seems like a “reproduction” of Hawaiian topography rendered in a Chinese manner. Tseng’s subject was the Ko’olau Range on the island of Oahu.⁴⁸ Formed by volcanic eruptions, the angular ridges are shaped by prehistoric lava spills and are subject to further alterations due to wind and precipitation.⁴⁹ These geographical attributes are effectively reflected in the painting through varying densities of the dotted brushwork. In areas that suggest the dynamic transition from one ridge to another, the dotted marks become more congregated, whereas in other areas they are shown gradually dispersing into the pictorial terrain,

⁴⁷ As part of Tseng’s prolific career as an artist and art historian, she did illustrations for the Confucian Analects for publications in the United States. As a result, it is likely that she was familiar with the *Zhongyong*. Yet the fact that she could have been familiar with the text does not suggest that she advocated the view expressed in the quote. If not from *Zhongyong*, similar views also appear in *Zhuangzi* or Zen texts. The notion of artistic autonomy has a long history in China, its appearance can be dated to pre-Qin classics as well as Guo Xi’s *Linquan Gao zhi* 林泉高致.

⁴⁸ Thompson, 79.

⁴⁹ Because of its wind-facing position, the Ko’olau Range traps precipitations, which results in numerous streams and waterfalls in the crevices of the ridges. See Encyclopedia Britannica Inc, “Koolau Range”, retrieved from <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Koolau-Range/46034>

eventually merging with the void. The tension created by the dotted marks also enables different types of visual interaction. When seen up close, the viewer becomes cognizant not only of the dots and their interaction with the surface, but also of the interplay between different contours. On the one hand, the contours within the mountain range are comprised of dotted marks aligned in layered motions of the brush; on the other, they are continuously being fragmented and reconfigured in relation to the ambient space. When seen from a distance, however, the significance of each dot subsides as it merges into a larger entity, whether it be a line, a plane, or a volumetric space. What is asserted then is the interaction between the different components of the pictorial field. By bringing these visual ambiguities into a larger form legible as a mountain range, the artist plays against the idea of site specificity. While in both China and the West, the identity of the place is often presumed to be associated with the artist's identity, Tseng's denial of this relationship suggests a process of denaturalizing.⁵⁰ Through the denaturalization of what may seem to be natural, she projected her own self into the work as a performative act.

The tension between legibility and indistinctness in mapping the viewing experience, moreover, manifests itself in the painting's spatial configuration. The mountain is purposefully set apart from the viewer by a row of tropical plants that appears create a specific point of entry into the landscape. The exaggerated contrast in scale between the two pictorial components, however, undermines convincing spatial recession. The illusion of continuity is constantly interrupted by an awareness of the ambiguous separation between the presumed foreground and background, along with the interplay among the micro-structures and textures created by the brushwork. Elements of the landscape belong neither to the foreground nor to the background, thus pointing to their dual function in pictorial space. This avoidance of legibility was a core

⁵⁰ Katz. 56.

feature of Tseng's self-conscious performance. The ambiguity informing this performance could have operated as a kind of shield against her recognition of multiple painful realities.

I

The 1950s was a time of widespread anti-Communist sentiment in the States. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, the U.S. and other Western nations took any number of actions to contain the spread of Communism. The Korean War (1950-1953), during which China provided military support for North Korea, was one of the large-scale conflicts that reflected heightened tensions between competing ideologies. Though eventually removed from command by the Truman administration, General Douglas MacArthur's insistence upon attacking China to end communism with help from Nationalist Taiwan, and his suggestion to authorize the use of nuclear weapons in Korea, overlapped with the widespread fear caused by the Red Scare.⁵¹ Senator McCarthy used Communism to justify state violence directed against labor unions, women, civil rights workers and ethnic minorities.⁵² Communism was represented as a domestic and global threat so menacing that Constitutional protections were set aside in the cause of battling an alien ideology.⁵³ The repercussions of the anti-Communist fervor of the forties and fifties would have affected minority groups in Hawaii. This post-World War II period was marked by a series of socially and politically significant

⁵¹ After the Nationalists' defeat to Mao-led Communists during the Chinese Civil War, the majority fled to Taiwan. The government was supported by the United States as part of its efforts to contain the infiltration of communism. As a result, the U.S. did not diplomatically recognize the PRC until 1979. This change in diplomatic relations resulted in the acknowledgement of one China, which would include both mainland and Taiwan. However, despite the presumed formal acknowledgement, issues associated with the recognition of China and Taiwan as one entity still persisted and have political repercussions till today.

⁵² Susan L. Brinson, *the Red Scare, Politics, and the Federal Communications Commission, 1941-1960* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004): 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

events that eventually prompted Hawaii's transition from a U.S. territory to its attainment of statehood in 1959.⁵⁴

As an ethnic minority living in Hawaii during the fifties, Tseng would have needed to reconfigure her identity as a Chinese American. Even though she never embraced Communism, as an ethnic minority she could have been deemed suspicious by any anti-Communist zealot. We need only consider the Japanese incarceration experience in Hawaii during World War II to comprehend the core significance of "being silent" in Tseng's work. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 served as the final catalyst for authorities in Hawaii to execute the plan to contain the local Japanese population.⁵⁵ The imposition of martial law resulted in the seizure of "suspicious" individuals and instilled fear in the entire Asian community.⁵⁶ An incarcerated Japanese language school teacher, Otokichi Ozaki, wrote of his experience on the night of his internment:

A silent farewell	子の寝顔
For sleeping children	別れて出ずる
Into the dark cold I go	しょうしょうと雨の
The rain gently falling. ⁵⁷	降りて出にけり

⁵⁴ Among the series of events that led to Hawaii's statehood, the Democratic Party's landslide victory in elections for the territorial legislature in 1954 was highly significant. Also known as the Democratic Revolution, widespread strikes and protests led to the crippling of power of the *haole* plantation owners and further marginalized the islands' Big Five, who leaned heavily towards the Hawaiian Republican Party. See Haas, "A Brief History," 43.

⁵⁵ KY Nakamura, "'Into the Dark Cold I Go, the Rain Gently Falling' Hawaii Island Incarceration," *Pacific Historical Review* 86, 3 (August 2017): 414.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁵⁷ Gail Honda ed., *Family Torn Apart: The Internment Story of the Otokichi Muin Ozaki Family* (Honolulu: Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii, 2012): 19. Quoted in Nakamura, 407.

In the *tanka* poem, Ozaki highlighted the element of silence, as he bid farewell to his family in dark, cold rain. He could not openly speak of his internment, nor could he speak for himself. In face of the growing fear among the Japanese population, he his personal sufferings were left unspoken for fear of exacerbating the fears of others. Within the Japanese community, suspicion became contagious. People would not talk to each other on the street, because “everyone is suspicious of one another, [and] everyone thinks her next door neighbor is a spy.”⁵⁸ To individuals living under the constant fear of incarceration, being silent may have been the best option to negotiate their interior relationship to the outside world. A comparable set of circumstances characterized the McCarthy era, when individuals were attacked and persecuted for being different. The staging of silence and illegibility informing *Hawaiian Landscape* therefore can credibly be read as politically charged. It could serve as a formal vehicle for projecting the artist’s personal experiences in Hawaii during the Cold War.

These pressures were further complicated by the fact that Tseng was the wife of an immigrant German art historian. Though the couple had settled in Hawaii in order to escape Communism, Germans also had been considered suspicious during and after World War II. Whether viewed as Chinese, American, or the wife of a German, Tseng’s identity would have been under scrutiny. Unable to embrace any one identity, Tseng self-consciously distanced herself from simplistic identity politics by means of a nuanced enactment of silence.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 419.

II

In *Hawaii Landscape*, what confirms the viewer's perception of the brush marks are, in fact, the "empty" spaces or pictorial "voids." These spaces consist of the light areas of the ridges, the intermediaries between the supposed foreground and background, and the parts that gradually enclose the body of mountain from the top corners. The ways in which the streaks of the unmarked areas connect and interact convey an enormous visual power, the effect of which would recall many Northern Song landscape paintings, especially Xu Daoning's *Fishing in a Mountain Stream* (Fig. 5). In both works, the mountainous terrain rises dramatically from the ground plane, emphasizing an upward thrust. The negative spaces serve as a means to set up visual rhythms and the interplay between light and shadow. Yet Tseng's work differs from Xu Daoning's in several aspects. By employing a consistent horizon line throughout, Xu's landscape gradually recedes into far distance, suggested by details such as the meandering creeks and the fainting of light.⁵⁹ The artist's use of proper scale and uniform lighting is reflective of the Song landscape naturalism, practice in the mid-to-late eleventh century.⁶⁰ In Tseng's depiction, a consistent horizon is also present, but the emphasis is never on consistency or uniformity. Surface tensions between brush strokes, illusionary spaces, and surface are privileged to convey patterns of disjunction and fragmentation, which in turn are reflective of the artist's experience in the larger world.

The dynamic visual energy in Tseng's painting sheds light on the traditional Chinese view that *qi* 氣, meaning "vital energy" or "force," is inherent in all elements in nature. In the

⁵⁹ Martin Powers, "The Temporal Logic of Citation in Chinese Painting," in *Art History*, Special Issue: Theorizing Imitation in a Global Context, edited by Paul Duro 37, no.4 (September 2014): 749.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

eyes of the Chinese painter Tao Chi (1641-1717), mountains flow like rivers, and the proper way of looking at the mountains, for him, is to see them as ocean waves frozen in time.⁶¹ Within the particular configuration of *qi*, static objects in nature engage in a dynamic process of interchangeability. All modalities of being become organically connected and participated in the larger process of cosmic transformation.⁶² While this concept of *qi* takes on its form in concrete beings in nature, it is in the unseen that the vital forces attain their reality beyond form.

The reality to which these pictorial “voids” allude finds its expression in the perceived absence of human beings in the Hawaiian landscape. In its very centrality, the mountain range appears as if isolated in nature, untouched by human activities. The sense of emptiness engages the concept of *xu* in Chinese painting in which the unmarked areas were meant to allow the viewers to form their own interpretation of a painting rather than being directed by what is literally represented. Though *shi* may seem to be a more positive quality than *xu* in denotation, *xu* is more valued in artistic endeavors.⁶³ Only by attaining a state of emptiness and tranquility can an artist attain a sharpness of vision. In “The Way of Heaven,” Zhuangzi noted: “Emptiness [*xu*], stillness, limpidity, silence, inaction are the root of ten thousand things.”⁶⁴ It comes as no surprise that these qualities are palpably present in Tseng’s painting. Beyond the static centrality of the mountain range lie the vital movements of nature, made manifest through the interplay of unmarked spaces. By the same token, the picture’s stillness and emptiness mirrors the artist’s

⁶¹ Tu Wei-Ming, “The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature,” in Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames eds., *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989): 74.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶³ Kuo, “Emptiness-Substance: Xushi,” 331.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

conflicting experience in the world, contingent on the socio-political circumstances that shaped her willful gesture of “being silent.”

III

Bearing in mind the historical conditions under which Tseng had to work, we can now relate her act of self-presentation in the fifties to the traditional function of painting in China as a medium of personal expression.⁶⁵ The literati practiced painting in the same spirit as in composing poetry or other forms of writing.⁶⁶ The painting served as a medium of self-fashioning through imagery, including the marks of the brush, or the poem calligraphically inscribed on the painting. This practice of situating oneself amidst multiple modes of representation is echoed in Tseng’s emerging role as an art historian in the 1950s.

During her early years in Hawaii, Ecke’s position as the Asian curator at the Honolulu Academy of Arts and his personal collection of Chinese paintings (a portion of these later entered the permanent collection of the museum) offered opportunities for Tseng to study Chinese art. In 1953, Tseng and Ecke received a joint Rockefeller Foundation grant for a study tour of public and private collections of Chinese art in the States.⁶⁷ No longer confined to local resources in Hawaii, the tour allowed the young art historian to gain a much broader understanding of artistic practices in Chinese art across more than a thousand years. Because Tseng could read classical Chinese as well as calligraphy of all styles, these experiences would have provided her with multiple, masterful examples of the juxtaposition of literati painting and calligraphic inscription. Having been enriched by this experience, Tseng embarked upon her

⁶⁵ Hay, “The Functions of Chinese Painting,” 115.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶⁷ Thompson, 11.

career as a historian of Chinese art. Like her paintings, these articles can be read as eloquent exemplars of self-fashioning: through the academic voice of the narrator, Tseng could evoke the readers' emotions even while enabling them to comprehend the works of other artists.

Among Tseng's publications in the fifties, "The Seven Junipers of Wen Zhengming" offers multiple examples of her strategies as a scholar. The article revolves around the investigation of the dominant mid-Ming literati circle, with a focus on Wen's biography and artistic events in his life.⁶⁸ With full access to period sources in Chinese, Tseng wove a narrative drawing on both social and artistic practice to reveal the significance of "seven junipers" as an icon of literati painting. This article offers insights into how Tseng attempted to translate her own cultural tradition for American consumption, at the same time that she was busy establishing her own reputation as an artist in the American art world.

To make Wen Zhengming's "Seven Junipers" more understandable to American audiences, she incorporated two lengthy translations from classical Chinese into English: one was a translation of the painter's prose poem written on the painting; the other was a colophon written by Chen Tao-fu, one of Wen's most distinguished students and friends.⁶⁹ Wen's poem recounts his communion with the cosmic realities of nature during the creation of his painting. Through the extensive use of metaphor and personification, the artist brought together a variety of phenomena that eventually mounted to his realization of the passage of time and his position in history. The junipers served as a self-portrait of Wen, and as he inscribed their traces onto the

⁶⁸ Tseng Yu-ho, "'The Seven Junipers' of Wen Cheng-Ming," *Archives of the Chinese Society of America* 8 (1954): 22-30.

⁶⁹ Tseng, "The Seven Junipers", 29.

paper, he also attached his own concern for immortality.⁷⁰ The only other surviving colophon was written by Chen Tao-fu, who provided an account of the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the painting by its first owner, Wang Shih-men. Like most colophons in Chinese painting, Chen offered specific information of the year, time, and location of his meeting with Wang. What prompted the acquisition of his teacher's masterpiece was Mr. Wang's "appearance and personal culture, so appealing to the Master's taste."⁷¹ His decision to give Mr. Wang the painting is not determined by whether he offered a high price or held a prominent social position. Instead, what matters is that the recipient's scholarly state of mind is deemed appealing by Chen's standards.

Tseng's translation of the two texts required her to balance the need for accurate translation against the need to faithfully render the overall poetic tone of the work.⁷² In the article, Tseng was obviously aware of the fact that her translation reflected her individual interpretation and could not achieve perfect linguistic equivalence. This much is evident from the sentence leading up to her English translations of Wen's poem: "the subsequent translation of the *fu* is not philological, but tries to follow its spirit."⁷³ Her conscious detachment from a literal translation in favor of one that could convey the emotions and tone of the work reflects how Tseng saw the process of translation as a means to attach her personal impression into another language. The translation of a poem, moreover, entails aspects such as rhyme, rhythm and form, difficult things to negotiate across two distinct systems of language. As she translated Wen

⁷⁰ Ibid., 28.

⁷¹ Ibid., 29.

⁷² Andries Wessels, "Translating the Waste Land: Literal Accuracy, Poetic Fidelity and Cross-cultural Communication," *Literator: Journal of Literary Criticism, Comparative Linguistics and Literary Studies* 22, no.2 (August 2001): 21.

⁷³ Tseng, "The Seven Junipers", 27.

Zhengming's lyricism into English, she naturally would have felt some resonance with Wen's reflection on the interplay between nature and culture in China. The process of translation, as a result, would have allowed her to feel or express what she would like to express in a way quite different from what she might achieve herself.⁷⁴

The process of translation is a form of cross-cultural communication. Translating from one language to another serves to bridge the boundaries between two literary and cultural traditions by bringing them closer in style and tone as well as in "sound, sense and feel."⁷⁵ This symbolic act of bridging cultural frontiers naturally takes place in Tseng's translations as well as her interpretation of Wen Zhengming's art. Additionally, the translation is conditioned by the ethnic and cultural identity of the translator, as she attempts to communicate the impact of Wen's artistry to an American audience informed by a different set of cultural presumptions.⁷⁶ In a manner similar to Wen's method of inflecting his painting and poem with renewed historical and cultural meaning in the present, Tseng relocated herself in history by inscribing her practice as an art historian within the painting's frame of reference.

IV

Tseng's evolving relationships with the Chinese diaspora took on a new dimension in 1957. During her five-month stay in Paris, Tseng had an exhibition of her works at the Galerie d'Orsay.⁷⁷ Among the prominent members from the Parisian art world who attended the show's

⁷⁴ Robert Wechsler, *Performing without a stage: The Art of Literary Translation* (North Haven, Connecticut: Catford, 1998): 32.

⁷⁵ Wessels, 29.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Thompson, 109.

preview and *vernissage*, the Chinese painter Pan Yuliang (1895-1977) stood out for her similar role in negotiating a transcultural identity in the an artistic milieu outside China.⁷⁸ Pan Yuliang and Tseng shared a number of thematic concerns: both were Chinese women artists who worked abroad; both dealt with the issue of self-presentation; and both contributed to the shifting boundaries of East and West interaction in their respective works. Compared to Pan's tendency toward depicting the female nude, a subject matter of European aesthetics and tradition, Tseng had adopted an artistic approach that was mainly rooted in classical Chinese painting. Of the paintings that were featured in the exhibition, most were recent works that depicted trees, rocks and landscape forms in a variety of styles. Many of them had Hawaiian themes, and one similar to *Silent Action* (Fig.6) was shown. It is important to note that none of her paintings from the late forties were included. One suspects that Tseng would have regarded these works as too "traditional" or "conservative" in style and execution.

The encounter between Tseng and Pan Yuliang in Paris highlights a variety of possibilities at play that would continue to shape the topic of self-presentation and East/West interaction. While continuing to work on female nudes in the 1950s, Pan began to incorporate increasingly visible elements from traditional Chinese culture.⁷⁹ Her use of the aesthetic line of Chinese ink painting to outline body forms conveys movement and evokes Chinese associations of womanhood (Fig.7).⁸⁰ To her, the free-flowing lines are expressions of emotion, eroticism and love. Situated in the context of Parisian art world, Pan's female nudes would have seemed legible to European audiences, given their subject matter. The paintings "Eastern" thematic

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Elissa H. Park, "Negotiating the Discourse of the Modern in Art: Pan Yuliang (1895-1977) and the Transnational Modern," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2013): 29

⁸⁰ Ibid.

associations with Chinese-ness and womanhood, however, would require a different set of cultural assumptions. To viewers who possessed a certain knowledge of Oriental aesthetics, Pan's works may have been read independently of outright exoticization. Inner qualities associated with Chinese womanhood such as "being gentle and soft" and "possessing a supple beauty" ascribe different meanings to the female body.⁸¹ Her nudes therefore became the vehicle through which Pan renegotiated and re-contextualized her Chinese heritage.

In contrast, Tseng's landscape paintings of trees, mountains, and rocks call very few European associations to mind. While the subject matter and genre may draw comparison with English landscape painters such as Turner and Constable, Tseng's tendency for using ink and subdued colors, her penchant for vigorous brushwork, and the dynamic interplay she fashions between mark and unmarked spaces, dissociates her paintings from the more romanticized landscapes of the English School. In the Parisian context, Tseng's landscapes would still have appeared quite "Chinese" given their classical techniques of execution. Upon closer examination, however, one would have noted that these landscapes were not "Chinese" landscapes. They were Hawaiian landscapes rendered in a Chinese manner. Most of the viewers to the exhibition, one would assume, had never been to Hawaii and knew next to nothing about Hawaiian topography. By presenting them with depictions of volcanic mountain ranges and tropical vegetation rooted in a Chinese form of expression, Tseng symbolically brought together multiple realities that transcend cultural and geographical frontiers. She took on an identity that was no longer defined by its singularity but rather by its shifting connections across place and time.

⁸¹ Ibid., 30.

Though different in their respective means of self-presentation, Tseng and Pan were attempting more than just a synthesis of East and West. Situated within a dynamic of cultural politics in a transnational context, both artists derived their depictions from a self-conscious awareness of the Chinese tradition and identification with Chinese-ness. Pan's female nudes were steeped in transcultural interaction; Tseng's Hawaiian landscapes served points of convergence for the overlapping trajectories that defined that Chinese diaspora.

PART THREE

Rewriting the Void: Assembling and Disassembling in *Zhuhua*

This chapter will center on *zhuhua*, an innovative painting technique that Tseng developed around 1957, shortly after her exhibition in Paris. Literally meaning “assembled painting,” the technique fuses different lines of thinking and practices, and involves Chinese techniques mediated by trends in European-American art. Among extant works in Tseng’s early *zhuhua* phase (pre-1965), *Ascent of a Forest* (1958) constitutes a representative example for exploring the interplay of surface qualities, material, and format (Fig.8). This approach to performative self-fashioning, when examined in relation to contemporary trends in the international art scene, requires some discussion of the concept of “diaspora.” Tseng’s stage was the global art world, and in positioning herself on that stage she could not avoid addressing the matter of her presumed “Chinese-ness.”⁸²

The artist’s experimentation with assemblages began as early as 1954, when she brought together six square panels in a horizontal arrangement.⁸³ Tseng’s conception of the term *zhuhua* has a variety of associations in Chinese culture. The form of the Chinese character *zhui* consists of a skill radical, juxtaposed with four hands on the right.⁸⁴ The meaning suggested by the form, evokes the idea of assemblage. The process of putting pieces together is related to quilt-work, for instance, as well as Buddhist robe-making.⁸⁵ The character implies a gathering, that can reference literati activities, including composing poems and lyrics, compiling scholarly works, or

⁸² Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts Collectives: from Godzilla, Godzookie to the Barnstormers* (Beijing: Timezone 8 Editions, 2009): 18.

⁸³ Thompson, 92.

⁸⁴ Tseng Yu-ho, “Dhui Hua,” 24.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

attaching appendices to classical texts.⁸⁶ In short, the character conveys the idea of joining smaller components together into a larger entity.

Unlike Tseng earlier work, what is likely to capture the viewer's attention upon first encountering *zhuihua* would be its distinct multi-panel format. Because they are neither aligned nor equal in height, the panels establish a dynamic interplay between surfaces and intermediary "empty" spaces. While it may seem as if the four panels in *Ascent of a Forest* were purposefully joined to suggest a continuous narrative, the attempt to see them as a unit is constantly interrupted by the painting's shifting format.

On the panels, Tseng has depicted a series of trees, rendered in semi-abstract brushwork, that appears beneath a suggestion of a radiant moon. Subtle gradations of black, dark blue, purple, yellow, and white create constant changes in tonality. The interweaving of colored washes and the curvilinear brush marks create surface tensions that resist definition. The sense of haziness, resulting from the constant interactions of different surface elements, provokes an awareness that the impact of each wash extends beyond the point where the artist's brush touches the paper. This ambiguity is partly alleviated by the form of the moon in the third panel to the left. Painted in light washes of purple highlighted by acrylic touches in white, it is probably the first form that the viewer would notice. It serves as a focal point, pulling both brush marks and textures within reach of its radiance. However, this centrifugal tendency is offset by less prominently marked areas. The panel to the far left is notable for its illegible brushstrokes and subdued colors. The hazy lines of tree-like forms and their surrounding washes convey a sense of detachment. They seem unrelated to the passages most likely to attract the viewer's attention.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

This type of push-pull tension, together with the deliberate use of visual ambiguity, finds resonance in the Southern Song painting tradition. Mi Youren's *Spectacular Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers* (Fig.9) provides interesting grounds for comparison. The painting portrays a landscape of meandering mountains, interspersed with swirls of clouds. Halfway across the composition, the clouds become the main theme.⁸⁷ Peter Sturman refers to this aspect of the painting as “perhaps the most abstract moment in the pre-modern history of China’s visual arts.”⁸⁸ The revelation of different passages, made possible through the interaction of ink washes, water, and clouds in a shadow band of space, builds up to a moment of drama and then slowly wafts away into serenity. Seen from a distance, the gradually built-up washes in Tseng’s multi-panel painting likewise create a fuzzy contour on the surface that might reminded the informed viewer of Southern Song landscapes. However, compared with the gentle, uninterrupted movement of the mountains in Mi Youren’s work, Tseng’s wash-based contours only project an illusion of continuity. Surface tensions created by the interplay of brush marks, ink washes and the paper support, assert disjunction instead of unity. This pattern of fragmentation is reinforced by interactions among the four panels. Though they are presented as one coherent entity, each panel takes on a pictorial and material reality of its own.

To the “sophisticated” viewer, Mi Youren’s staging of his lyrical journey has obvious literary associations with the term “Xiaoxiang” and with the painting’s citation of the past. While the term literally designates “two rivers” or “a geographical region,” *Xiaoxiang* was, to Mi Youren, an alternative ontology generated by his personal vision.⁸⁹ The broader reference to

⁸⁷ Peter Sturman, “Mi Youren and the Inherited Literati Tradition: Dimensions of Ink Play,” (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1989): 309.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 324.

natural process also can be found in Tseng's work, suggested both by its title, *Ascent of a Forest*, and by the incorporation of ethereal forms suspended in a silent, ghostly pictorial space.

Transcending both geographical identification and time, the painting shows parts of "the forest" in semi-abstraction so as to evoke the endless production of living forms in the larger world.

Besides the reference to natural process in the painting, the citation of the past was another technique employed in Mi Youren's *Spectacular Views*. By 1137, with a semblance of order and stability finally emerging in Southern China, the focus of concern shifted from survival to preservation and retrieval.⁹⁰ The legacies of Su Shi's circle were increasingly being romanticized among Southern Song literati.⁹¹ Mi Youren's improvisation on compositional forms associated with the artist Dong Yuan, who had been immortalized by his father Mi Fu, entailed an awareness of the past both in terms of his family tradition and of his own position in the newly emerged literati tradition. In a similar manner, Tseng's conception of her *zhuihua* technique improvised on modes of composition, brushwork and theories drawn from literati painting. In explaining her relationship with tradition, she wrote: "'Preservation' of the past is a noble task, but it should not be confused with 'creativity.' They are equally important but represent two separate perspectives."⁹² While recognizing that part of an artist's responsibility involves preserving or referencing tradition, Tseng saw the task as being separate from her creative endeavors. Her work therefore should not be regarded as "rooted" in the Chinese tradition, but rather as functioning under multiple temporalities on a non-linear timeline.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 311.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Tseng, "Dsui Hua," 28.

As a multi-panel painting, *Ascent of a Forest* invites a variety of interpretations that derive from the work's basic status as an object in the material world. Reading from right to left, the viewing experience of the panels resembles that of a handscroll, during which different sections of the scene are gradually revealed. By merging smaller pictorial vignettes into a coherent whole, the viewer engages in a process of active assembling. In addition, revelatory aspects of the handscroll are associated with the enactment on the viewer's own agency. He or she controls the speed at which the scroll is rolled out, the duration of attention, and the perceptual relationship between individual parts and the whole. Such processes correspond to the semantic range of the character *zhui*. The handscroll format also implies a social dimension. In literati gatherings or museums, the activity of reading handscrolls typically takes place in the presence of others. The conflation of private and public boundaries, as demanded by the handscroll viewing experience, also has developed into an important concept in discussions of modern art. Echoes of such practices can be found in the multi-panel format of Tseng's later work.

Although Tseng's painting may evoke the viewing experience of a handscroll, its format is closer to that of a folding screen. Consisting of several framed panels connected by hinges, the folding screen has both decorative and practical uses. While the painted images are usually reflective of the owner's taste, the screen's position in the interior serves to demarcate one space from another, thereby enhancing the occupant's entitlement to a certain degree of privacy. Though this type of furniture originated in China, some of the best surviving examples are to be found in Japan. As an enthusiast of Japanese art, Tseng must have been aware of Japanese folding screens, often made with gold leaf and tempera to convey a shimmering visual effect. The use of different gradations of yellow on the edges of the panels in *Ascent of a Forest* may

therefore be seen as possible references to the gold-laden surfaces of Japanese folding screens. Such self-conscious references to Japanese screens also appear in works by Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), who was known for his interest in Japanese art and its methods. Among works that fall into Klimt's Golden Period, *The Three Ages of Woman* (Fig. 10) is characterized by ornamented patterns and the use of metallic paints, a feature that would find its resonance in Tseng's subsequent paintings. By taking an artistic format that has its roots in both Chinese and Japanese culture and rendering it in the manner of ink and color painting, the artist consciously placed her work under multiple time frames and cultural and geographical frontiers. The innovative span of the format as well as the pictorial elements therefore highlights the relationship between form and image.

I

Tseng's *zhuihua* also foregrounds the idea of making. Through a conscious assemblage of brushstroke, ink, paper, and panels, she inscribed her presence within the surface of interaction. No longer a passive artist who simply holds up a brush and paints, Tseng actively engages with the painting's surface as well as its fictive space. This emphasis on action echoes contemporary developments in the American art world. For Harold Rosenberg, who coined the term, "action painting" referred to a full-bodied engagement with a painting's surface.⁹³ The canvas is no longer a representation, but rather a record of the material traces and the artist's psychic sensibilities. The pictorial field, as a result, becomes a stage where brush marks and the

⁹³ Fred Orton, "Action, Revolution and Painting," *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no.2 (1991): 3. It is important to note that even though Rosenberg may have coined the term, the idea is closer to Roger Fry's calligraphic lines. See also, Roger Fry, "Lines as a Means of Expression in Modern Art," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 33, no. 189 (Dec. 1918): 202.

creative experience leave their imprint. Given the works' presumed non-specificity and flatness, the viewer becomes increasingly aware of the medium as a site in which the action is enacted.

In *Ascent of a Forest*, Tseng layered Chinese antique painting paper over the rectangular Masonite panels. One of the advantages of antique paper is the way it absorbs ink and pigment.⁹⁴ The diluting effect of the subdued color washes could not have been achieved without the use of this paper. Another quality associated with antique paper are the streaks left by the fibers visible across the surface. Upon close examination the painting's indistinct effects make the viewer more aware of the paper's textural qualities. The irregular patterns in the paper create dynamic movements that vary constantly. The surface is no longer flat. Instead, the slightly protruding fibers constantly interact with the brushwork and the supporting panels. The juxtaposition between the fragile and the robust, the translucent and the concrete, the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, allows for a conversion between surface and material and fictive space, directing the viewer to the painting's pictorial details as well as its materiality. The encounter between ink and color, paper, acrylic and the Masonite panels, is simultaneously diffused by the disintegrating marks, the spatial incoherence, and the multi-panel format. By creating a pictorial as well as material tension through convergence and diffusion, Tseng highlights her action in the process of painting.

The ambiguity of space constitutes another focus of the artist's action. Unlike her previous paintings in which "empty" spaces are evoked by unmarked passages that directly reveal the support, *Ascent of a Forest* rarely exposes the support. The artist applied ink and paint to most of the surface, leaving only a very small number of passages in which yellows appear to

⁹⁴ Thompson, 89.

have been applied to the support as a kind of underpainting. To discuss the significance of the void therefore requires a different understanding of “empty.” In this painting, what forms the void are the seemingly blank expanses of washes of brushstrokes that enclose the trees. These areas include parts where white acrylic marks are painted directly onto the paper, the intermediary spaces between darker color washes, and the direct exposures of panels in yellow. In the span of Tseng’s semi-abstract “landscape,” these “empty” areas are constantly active. They serve to establish different surface tensions and prompt the viewer’s gaze from one disjunctive part to the next.

These surface “voids,” moreover, raise questions about the painting’s edges. Long streaks of color on the far-left panel seem at first glance to suggest enclosure. As the viewer shifts her attention to subsequent views, however, the suggestion of containment disappears. The exposure of the Masonite surface near the edges of the panels, and the applications of white acrylic paint prompts the viewer to imagine a reality existing outside the pictorial surface. The overlapping of realities transforms the artist’s relationship to the viewer. Tseng assembles time, experience, and memory onto the surface, and the spectator partakes in a similar process through the act of viewing.

II

The use of surface marks to convey the artist’s temperament and feelings, though articulated in literati theory, is only implied in Tseng’s own explanation of her art-making. She wrote:

Every artist must consider the distance between his art and his emotion. Certain artists perceive their work as a direct outlet of their feelings ... Between the two extremes of “emotion over intellect” and “intellect over emotion,” one can judge the distance between the artist and his work. In my own case, I require a certain distance between myself and my paintings. I welcome this distance.⁹⁵

By asserting some distance between her emotions and the painting, Tseng takes literati theory for granted and set limits on the degree to which the artist should “lodge” her emotions in the work. To demonstrate her point, she goes on to explain how her paintings are construed in a box-like space.⁹⁶ Behind the presentation on the surface, one can find lines and plastic volumes arranged in overlapping and divergent perspectives.

Rather than seeing “action painting” and Tseng’s intellectual approach to *zhuihua* as dichotomies then, it seems that the two have a good deal in common. By actively engaging with the process of assembling and layering, Tseng “lodged” her emotions and experiences through her interaction with the surface. The viewer, by unpacking the tensions between painted marks, materials, and the surface, participates in her performance by reading these feelings. This encounter between the artist and the viewer thus highlights the notion of an aesthetics of performativity. Rather than a confrontation with the physical object, the concept emphasizes the process of communicative exchange.⁹⁷ According to Kester, the performative artist differs from a traditional theatrical performer in that the artist and the participant are connected through a series of “situational encounters” rather than having the “performer” as the “expressive locus.”⁹⁸ Consequently, an exhibition space enables unstructured dialogues or forums of interaction. The

⁹⁵ Tseng, 28-29.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹⁷ Chang, 122.

⁹⁸ Grant K. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2004): 90. Quote in Chang, 122.

surface “voids” in Tseng’s painting therefore take on a dual function. On one hand, they function as edged spaces that enable the transition from one pictorial element to another. On the other, these areas provide an entry for viewers to engage with the work’s surface qualities and imagery. The edges are open, and so are the “voids.”

Working with the edges and “empty” areas also allows the artist to engage in an active negotiation between the center and the periphery. While this negotiation can be pictorial, it is also contingent on contemporary circumstances under which the work was created. As a Chinese artist working in Hawaii, Tseng became increasingly aware of her presence within a global community. Rather than becoming isolated from contemporary artistic developments in mainland U.S., Hawaii in the 1950s provided a series of opportunities for the artist to re-configure her position with relation to the international art world. Many of these artistic exchanges would later prove crucial to Tseng’s conception of the *zhuihua* technique.

Among artists who accepted invitations to visit Hawaii were Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1950), Max Ernst (1952) and Josef Albers (1954).⁹⁹ Out of the three artists Macdonald-Wright might be the one who was most aware of the interplay of Asian and Western ideas and attempted to combine these two seemingly divergent traditions into a theoretical framework and artistic practice. In his lecture delivered at the University of Hawaii in 1950, Macdonald-Wright eliminates the distance of the East-West binary:

⁹⁹ Thompson, 99.

For, at a bottom, while the approaches to creative activity have been, as we have seen radically different in East and West, the final destination is *a single one* (my italics). The West, through the emphasis of form as symbol, has evoked psychic balance – the East goes directly, via ideation by means of unemphasized form, to psychic totality.¹⁰⁰

By stressing the convergence of these two traditions, the artist conveys the need for negotiation rather than adherence to one approach. This ideal of reframing Asian and European-American art as ultimately a single entity is echoed in Tseng's 1963 publication, *Some Contemporary Elements in Chinese Art*, although she adopted a different line of thinking to make the point. In the introduction, she made states that "one can always find common elements throughout art history East and West; they are as numerous as the differences."¹⁰¹ Instead of only one intersecting point between East Asian and European-American art from divergent ends, Tseng referred to numerous points of encounter. These meetings were theoretical and psychological as well as pictorial.¹⁰² Even though Tseng and Macdonald-Wright were both aware of how the East-West binary could be broken, Tseng tended to see the contacts from a formal or pictorial point of view. Such an approach grew naturally from her knowledge, as an active painter and a practicing art historian, of both Chinese and European-American art.

Beyond the merging of East-West traditions, Macdonald-Wright engaged in a critical examination of art from a psychological perspective. His recognition of the process of art-

¹⁰⁰ Stanton MacDonald-Wright, "Approaches to Oriental and Occidental Art," (Summer Lecture, 1950) in *Occasional Papers* 54 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1951): 60.

¹⁰¹ Tseng Yu-ho, *Some Contemporary Elements in Classical Chinese Art* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1963): 1.

¹⁰² In the book, Tseng provided a series of cross-cultural comparisons that are short and interesting and at the same time insightful. She compared the branches entwining the seated Lohan in an eighteenth-century painting to those in Hieronymus Bosch's *Temptation of St. Anthony* and commented on the painting's resemblance to the work of contemporary painter Ben Shahn. She also compared the textual quality of abstract patterned waves in an eighteen-century Chinese landscape painting to the turbulent, action-focused brushwork in Abstract Expressionist works. See Tseng, 28 & 37.

making as an equilibration of the conscious and the unconscious, echoes sentiments commonly expressed by Song literati, as well as ideas explored by Surrealist artists of the time.¹⁰³ Among Surrealists who were active in the U.S. in the fifties, Max Ernst stood out for his European and American connections, his inventions of new techniques (including *frottage* and *grattage*), and experimentations with collage.¹⁰⁴ When Ernst visited Hawaii during the summer of 1952 he and Tseng struck up a friendship. Within the close-knit art community in Honolulu, Tseng and Ecke found it easy to socialize with him. Their connection was made even closer by the fact that Ecke and Ernst were had both emigrated from Germany to the U.S.¹⁰⁵ Over the years Ernst would continue to be a friend and ardent supporter of Tseng's work. He attended her Paris exhibition in 1957 and purchased two of Tseng's assembled-paper paintings as a gesture of encouragement.¹⁰⁶

III

Tseng's *zhuihua* method also can be viewed as a form of collage. While producing a series of multi-panel works, like *Ascent of a Forest*, Tseng came to the idea of creating irregular framing through torn edges. She once commented on the development of this technique:

Because I have no preconceived ideas, the paper can suggest a wide variety of images. A simple accidental shape can develop into a predominant form or serve as the basis for a composition. The unpredictability of shapes and forms is both challenging and stimulating.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ MacDonald-Wright, 60.

¹⁰⁴ An "automatic method" of creative production, *frottage* creating a rubbing of a textured surface using a pencil or other drawing material. In *grattage*, the technique is adapted to oil painting. The canvas is prepared with a layer or more of paint then laid over to the textured objects which is then scraped over. See Tate Art Term, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/frottage>.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Thompson, 109-110.

¹⁰⁷ Tseng, 26.

Her words shed light on the duality in art-making that constantly oscillates between spontaneity and control. Her later *zhuihua* works such as *Out of Condition* (1962, Fig.11), *Dragon Land* (1963, Fig.12) and *Redwood Forest* (1964, Fig.13) demonstrate these negotiations through the use of torn paper.

Since the emergence of collage as a major fine arts form in the early twentieth century, notions of disintegration, fragmentation and integration had become central to understanding the pictorial and formal language of modern art.¹⁰⁸ The combination of disparate materials and objects required the artist to consciously cut, choose, shift, paste, and sometimes even tear something off and start again.¹⁰⁹ By emphasizing the gesture that resulted in a surface condition, the artist inscribed her experiences onto the external world through movements across time and space. Though originating in Cubist art, the medium of collage took on new sets of meaning in the post-World War II era. In the 1950s and 60s, a number of American artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg engaged with a pictorial approach called the Aesthetic of Indifference.¹¹⁰ To advocate indifference and neutrality as a psychological and intellectual means of distancing themselves from the Cold War and the McCarthy period, these artists denied their commitment and feeling in art.¹¹¹ Having lived through the same era in a U.S. territory, Tseng would have had similar experiences. Her identity as a Chinese artist, moreover, would have made her fears even more palpable. Through a filter of silence and indifference, Tseng assembled her brushwork, materials and surfaces in *Ascent of a Forest*. These pictorial and

¹⁰⁸ Katherine Hoffman, "Collage in the Twentieth Century: An Overview," in Hoffman ed., *Collage: Critical Views*, Studies in the fine arts, criticism 31 (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1989): 18.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Motherwell, cited in David Rosand, "Paint, Paste and Plane," in Jeanine Parisier Plottel ed. *Collage* (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1983): 132. Quoted in Hoffman, 18.

¹¹⁰ Moira Roth, "The Aesthetic of Indifference," in *Difference/Indifference*, 45.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

surface elements allude to her unspeakable emotions in sustained ambiguities, concealment, and fragmentation.

Among the modern artists who experimented with the medium of collage, Tseng identified most with Paul Klee, who she called a “European literati.”¹¹² Out of the various ideals connecting their artistic practices, Tseng shared with Klee an interest in music and poetry as sources of inspiration. Commenting on the role of music in her *zhuihua* works, she wrote: “Music represents the most abstract form of expression. It does not need a descriptive or symbolic mechanism and emerges out of psychological and emotional depth.”¹¹³ In its most abstract form, music enables the artist to speak without using language. When translated onto the painted surface, the experience of listening to and interpreting music manifests itself through the pictorial language of indistinctness and formal disintegration.

Rather than seeing music as a sonic metaphor for artistic expression, Klee came to understand music rhythm through his own appreciation of music. Out of the variations of themes and structures in music, what captured his attention was the polyphonic fugue: “The element of time must be eliminated. Yesterday and today as simultaneous events. Polyphony in music met this demand to some extent...”¹¹⁴ The significance of painting abstractions, as Klee noted, lies in its simultaneity. The overlapping brush marks, materials, and surfaces constitute structured areas in which “many voices” converge. In examining Tseng’s *zhuihua* work, the special attention paid

¹¹² Tseng said about Klee in an interview with Melissa Thompson: “I admire him greatly and think he is the most important person to me for the twentieth century. Far more than Picasso and others. Because he made his abstractions so natural, to make sense, and put it into truly artistic and aesthetic level. And, no, I don’t think anybody has jumped beyond what he has done.” See Thompson, 95.

¹¹³ Tseng, 29.

¹¹⁴ Hajo Duchting, *Paul Klee: Painting and Music* (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1997): 65.

to surface qualities is reflective of the spatial and temporal dimension of polyphonic painting. The subtle fissures and tensions in the pictorial field merge multiple realities through the interpenetration of space and time. One can appreciate that Tseng's belief that "one can always find common elements throughout art history East and West; they are as numerous as the differences." Far from voicing an appeal to some vague globalism, these words speak to Tseng's hard-won insights into the possibilities of expression in the art world of the mid-twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

In the three paintings we have examined, illusions of unity and consistency serve as pictorial conceits for the underlying tensions between brushstrokes, ink, materials, and surface. The pushing and pulling forces of convergence and divergence, concreteness and emptiness, legibility and indistinctness serve as visual plays upon the viewer's perceptions and expectations. These surface qualities of fragmentation and disjunction, moreover, serve as points of access to a larger set of circumstances that the artist attempted to deal with around the creation of the three paintings. Tseng's experiences during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Cold War, and the McCarthy period surely shaped the ways in which the works can be read and interpreted.

The artist's active engagement with the idea of the "void" and with pictorial qualities such as haziness and emptiness led her to explore tensions between seen and unseen, spoken and unspoken, implicit and explicit. The sense of duality highlights how her works would could silently allude to extra-artistic issues while remaining firmly grounded in their own physicality. The implications of negative space therefore provide the overall key to understanding the three paintings. The "void" has a variety of functions and connotations: it serves as an intermediary between the marked and unmarked spaces and sustains the duration of attention; it refers to a state of silence and stillness that conceal the artist's conflicting experiences in the world; it defines not the content but instead offers a space of access for viewers' interpretations.

Tseng's career defined by her shifting affiliations with the global art world. Her extensive travels in Hawaii, mainland U.S., and Europe allowed for multiple points of encounter with respect to different cultures, histories, and ethnic groups. Working in the Chinese diaspora, Tseng continued to negotiate her evolving relationship to concepts such as "Chinese-ness" or "Asian-ness." Since no single, unified narrative can sum up her transnational experiences, the

three paintings foreground her need to embrace polyphony and contradiction. At a time when conceptions of identity and identifications are increasingly being destabilized and re-contextualized, Tseng Yu-ho therefore makes a good case study for understanding a renewed dimension of Chinese-ness.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig.1-1. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-1, from *Sceneries near Yuanming Yuan (The Old Summer Palace)*, album of twelve leaves, 1944, Ink and color on paper,



Fig.1-2. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-2.



Fig.1-3. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-3.



Fig.1-4. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-4.



Fig. 1-5. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-5.



Fig.1-6. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-6



Fig.1-7. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-7



Fig.1-8. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-8



Fig.1-9. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-9.



Fig.1-10. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-10.



Fig.1-11. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-11.

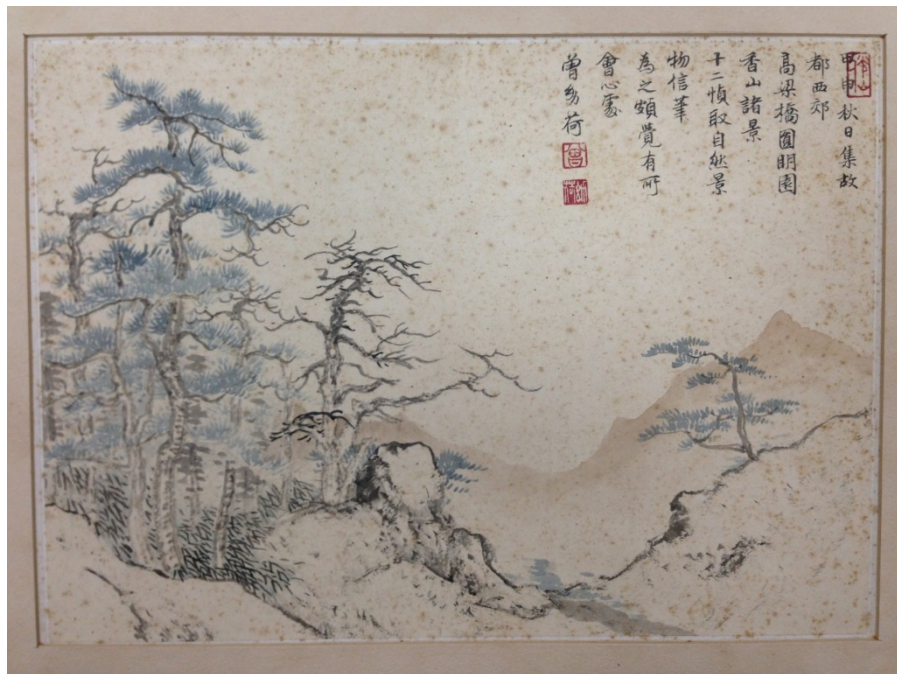


Fig. 1-12. Tseng Yu-ho, Album 1-12.



Fig. 2. Gong Xian, Leaf from an album entitled *Kung Pan-ch'ien shou-t'u hua-kao*, dimensions unknown.

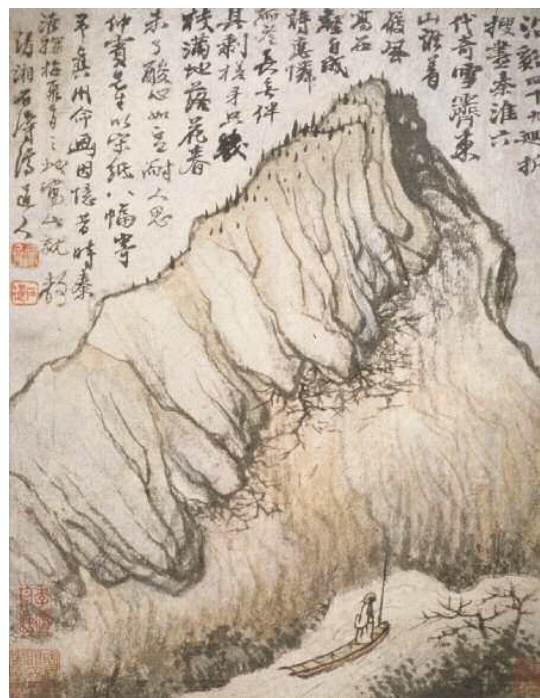


Fig. 3. Shitao, "Searching for Plum Blossom along the Qinhuai River", 1695-6, from *Reminiscences of Qinhuai River*, album of eight leaves, Ink and light color on paper.

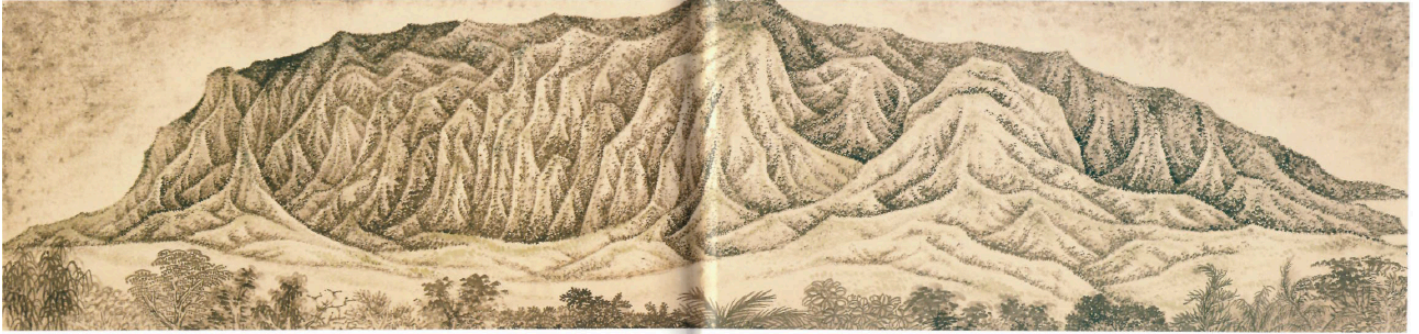


Fig 4. Tseng Yu-ho. *Hawaiian Landscape*, 1955, ink on paper, 38.7 x 167.5 cm.

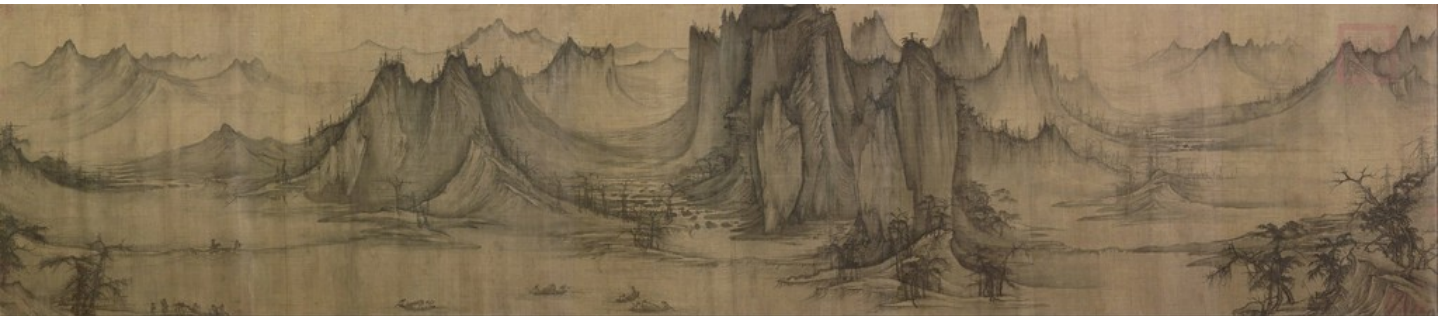


Fig. 5. Xu Daoning, attributed to, *Fishing in a Mountain Stream*, Northern Song period, ca. A.D. 1050, ink and light colors on silk, 48.3 cm (height) x 209.6 cm (width).

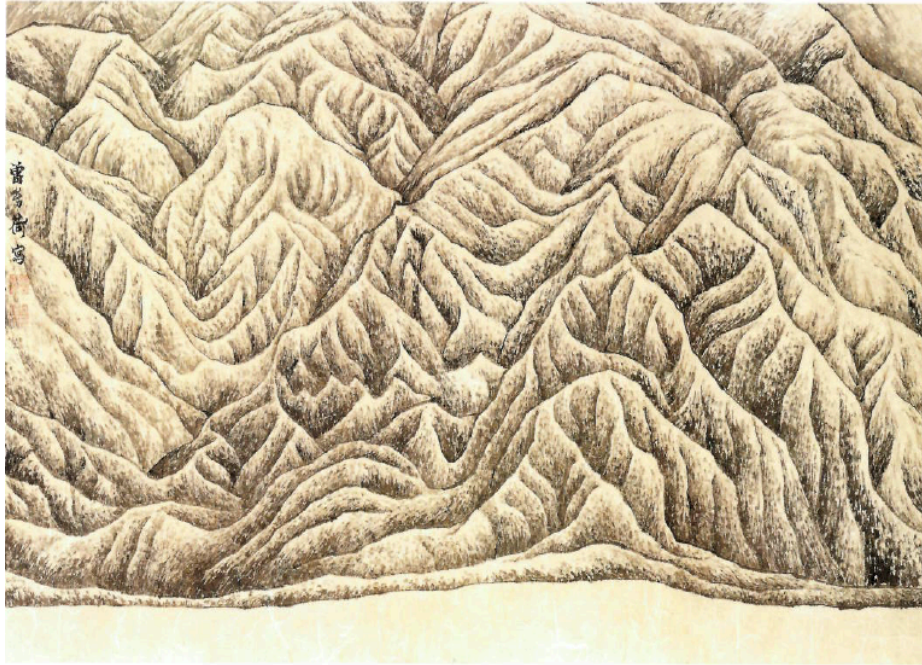


Fig. 6. Tseng Yu-ho, *Silent Action*, 1955, ink and color on paper, 55.2 x 78.7 cm.



Figure 7. Pan Yuliang, *Two Woman*, 1950, ink and color on paper, 41 x 53cm.



Fig 8. Tseng Yu-ho, *Ascent of a Forest*, 1958, ink, paper and acrylics on masonite, 4 panels 27.2 x 52 cm, height on different level, total 69 x 132 cm.

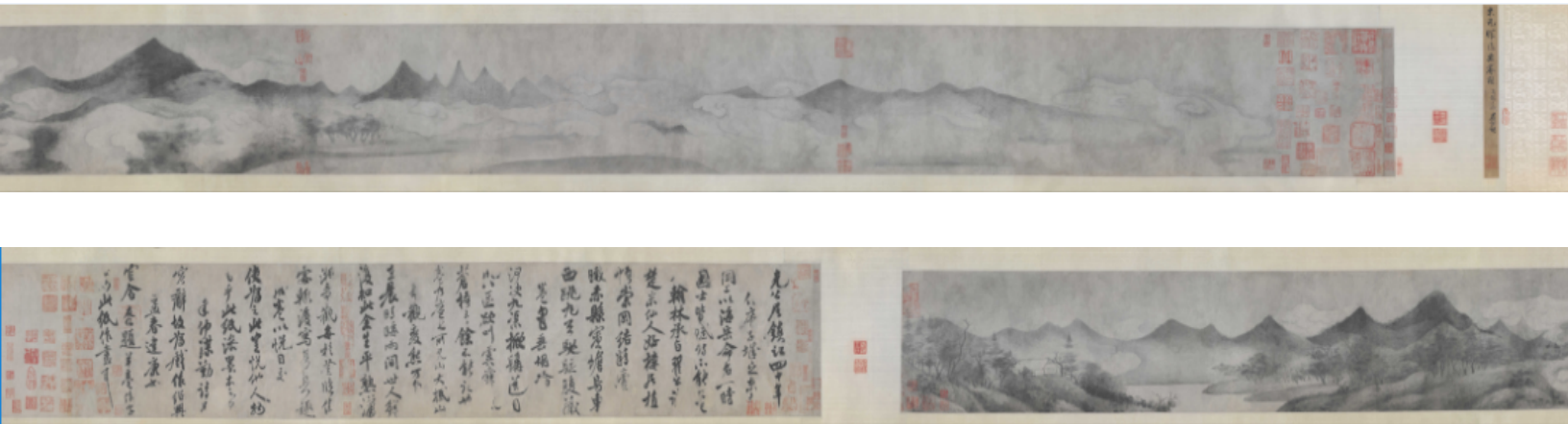


Fig. 9. Mi Youren, *Spectacular Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, 1074-1153, handscroll, ink on paper, 19.8 x 289.5 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

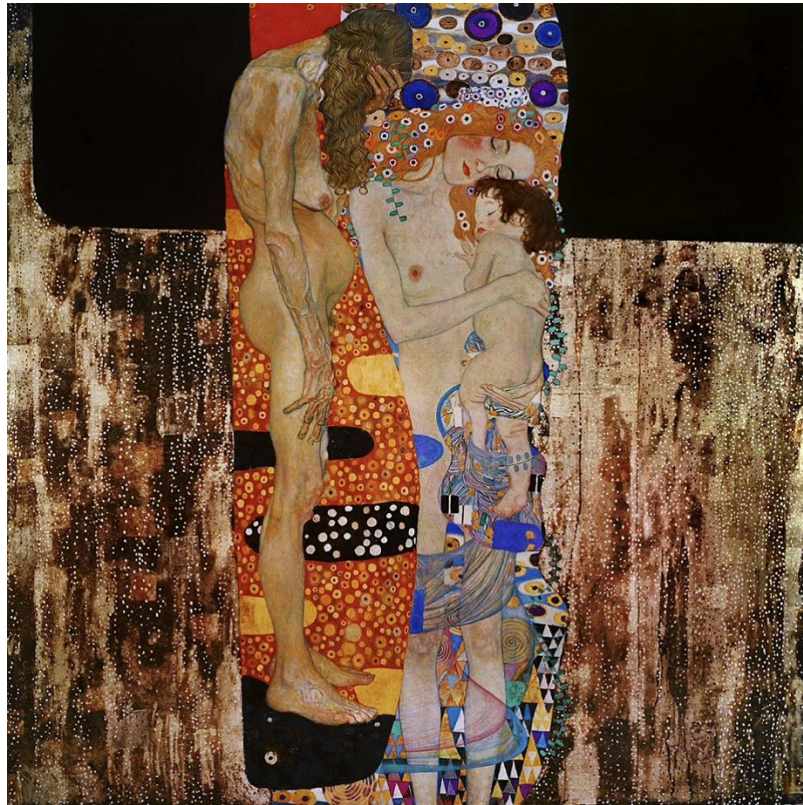


Fig.10. Gustav Klimt, *The Three Ages of Woman*, 1905, oil on canvas, 180 x 180 cm.



Fig. 11 Tseng Yu-ho, *Out of Condition*, 1962, ink, color and paper on Masonite, 61 x 91.5 cm.



Fig.12. Tseng Yu-ho, *Dragon Land*, 1963, tapa gold and paper, with lacquer paint on screen, 91.5 x 183 cm.

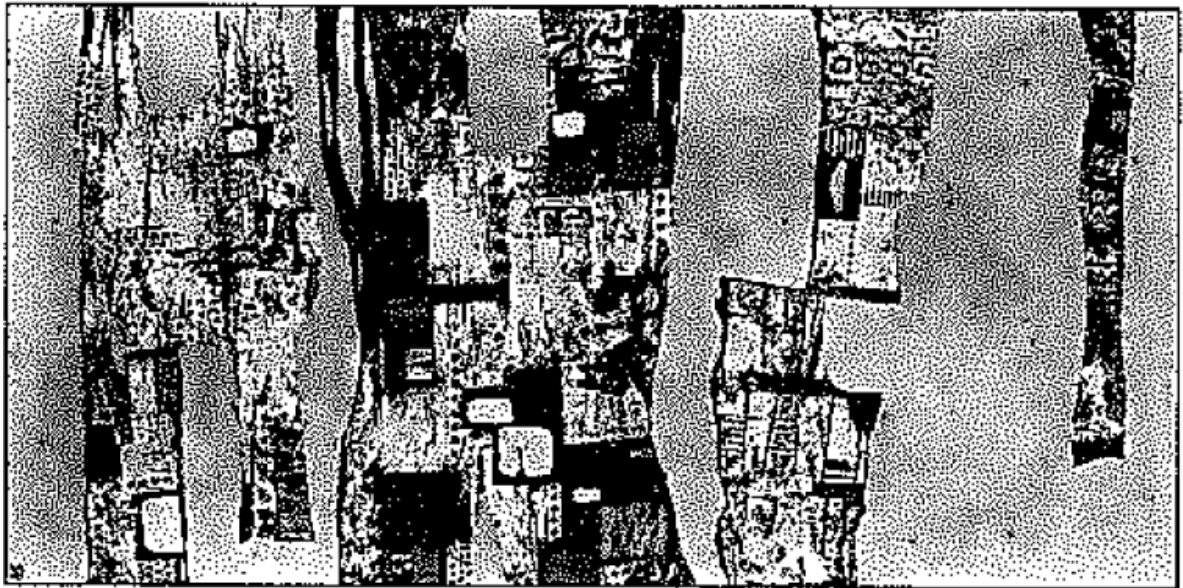


Fig.13. Tseng Yu-ho, *Redwood Forest*, 1964, gold on tapa and paper on Masonite, 61 x 122 cm.

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