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1

THIS IS THE STORY of existence, and it begins with a painting. Like countless other paintings in the Chinese tradition, this painting by Shih T'ao (see frontispiece foldout) appears at first glance to show someone gazing into a landscape, an artist-intellectual accompanied by his attendant. But mysterious dimensions quickly reveal themselves, suggesting there is much more here than meets the eye. The poem inscribed on the painting describes a landscape that includes ruins of city walls and houses, abandoned orchards and gardens,

but there is no sign of such things in the painting. The painting's visible landscape isn't realistic at all. It feels infused with mystery: depths of pale ink wash; black lines blurred, smeared, bleeding; mountains dissolving into faint blue haze. And there's so much empty space in the composition, so much mist and sky. This sense of empty space is expanded dramatically by the soaring perspective: the mountain ranges appearing one beyond another suggest the gazer is standing on a mountaintop of impossible heights. And he seems a part of that emptiness, his body the same texture and color as the haze suffusing mountain valleys. Finally, there is the suggestion that the image is somehow a rendering of the gazer's mind, an interior landscape we may possibly share when looking attentively at the painting. Or perhaps that the gazer has returned to some kind of originary place where mountains are welling up into existence for the first time, alive and writhing with primeval energy? Perhaps both at the same time: an originary place indistinguishable from the gazer's mind, and even indistinguishable from our own minds?

There's mystery everywhere in this painting because it isn't a painting about someone gazing into a beautiful landscape, as it might appear. It is, instead, a painting about existence, about our open and immediate experience of existence itself. All of Chinese spirituality and art is grounded in this experience. Poetry, calligraphy, painting, Taoist philosophy, Ch'an (Zen) Buddhist practice: as we will see, they tell the story of existence, and

at the same time, they are spiritual practices that return us to an immediate experience of existence as a cosmological tissue. Mountain landscape itself offered another form of spiritual practice, a practice that incorporates all the others and is the deep philosophical subject of Shih T'ao's painting.

Artist-intellectuals found their spiritual home in mountains, thought of mountains as their teachers, and so mountain landscape was the most natural site for the spiritual practices of artist-intellectuals. They lived as much as possible in cultivated reclusion among mountains, where they also built monasteries. They practiced Ch'an meditation among mountains, either alone at home or with companions in monasteries. They wandered mountains, often lingering on summits as in the painting. They dreamed mountains, and built their creative lives around them. Indeed, rather than an expanse of physical terrain, they saw in the wild forms of mountain landscape the very workings of the Cosmos.

Millennia of Chinese culture's spiritual and artistic insight, Shih T'ao's lifetime of landscape practice: if we could distill all of that into the moment portrayed in this painting (a moment we are invited to share, for we *are* meant to identify with the gazer, aren't we?), it would look something like this: We walk to a mountaintop, face out across ridgeline beyond ridgeline, then close our eyes. We forget everything we know, all of the ideas and knowledge and assumptions about ourselves and the nature of things, all of the thoughts and memories

defining us each as a center of identity. We turn to the empty darkness of pure awareness, which is all that remains after this practice of forgetfulness, and we inhabit the expansive space of that darkness.

Since its origins in the ancient Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions, mainstream Western philosophy has generally taken as its starting point the center of memory and speculative thought, that center of identity that we have just emptied away. Descartes' radical skepticism, for instance, by which he stripped away everything that could be doubted until he found a beginning place: that which is incontrovertibly true. And what he found was thought and self-identity, the timeless Christian soul: "I think, therefore I am." This kind of approach invested Western philosophy from the beginning with an assumption that consciousness is fundamentally different from the empirical realm of existence, an assumption that shaped every level of experience, as we will see; and that assumption led to a preoccupation with otherworldly metaphysics and the seemingly timeless verities of abstract ideas.

But China's ancient sages assumed that this immediate experience of empty awareness was the beginning place, that dwelling here in the beginning, free of thought and identity, is where we are most fundamentally ourselves, and also where deep insight into the nature of consciousness and reality logically begins. It is a place outside the normal human framework, and Shih T'ao's painting establishes this perspective in an extreme and literal sense: it

describes a person isolated and far from home and civilization, standing near the ruins of an ancient city with its abandoned houses and gardens. But you can begin at the beginning anytime, anywhere. A simple room, for instance, morning sunlight through windows lighting the floor; a sidewalk cafe, empty wine glass on the table, trees rustling in a slight breeze, sunlit passersby; a routine walk through a park, late-autumn trees bare, rain clattering in fallen leaves.

Distilling that practice of forgetfulness further, eyes closed, forgetting and forgetting, emptying our minds completely, we turn to the empty darkness that is our own awareness in and of itself. We inhabit the expansive space of that darkness for a time, then open our eyes. We gaze out as if it were sight seeing for the first time, gaze with no expectations at all about the nature of consciousness and reality, wanting to see them as they are in and of themselves, free of all our tenuous human stories about them, our ideas and beliefs. This is, in a sense, the moment portrayed in the painting, and in it we encounter a revelation altogether unexpected and unimaginable: existence! Existence miraculously and inexplicably here when there might just as well be nothing! The sheer presence of materiality—vast and deep, everything and everywhere!

There were in ancient China many conceptual schemes used to approach the deep nature of this existence. One of the most fundamental of these schemes is the distinction between heaven and earth. Heaven and earth are

the embodiment of *yang* (male) and *yin* (female) on a cosmic scale, and their interaction generates the perpetual transformation that is the life of the Cosmos. This Cosmos is the Cosmos of our immediate experience, and if we don't think of heaven and earth as mere abstractions, we can see that heaven and earth are indeed an accurate description of the physical reality in which we live. The generative life-supporting reality of earth requires the infusion of energies from heaven, energies that evolve through annual patterns creating the seasons: sunlight, rain, snow, air. Indeed, as we now know, earth is made of heaven's scattering of stardust, and will again become heaven when our sun explodes into a nebula that engulfs earth, turning it into stardust. We dwell in our everyday lives at the origin place where this vital intermingling of heaven and earth takes place, at the center of a dynamic cocoon of cosmic energy, an all-encompassing generative present, but we are rarely aware of this wondrous fact.

Reinvigorating our awareness of that wonder is one purpose of Chinese landscape painting as a spiritual practice. This explains the primacy of mountain landscape in the tradition, for mountain landscape is where existence itself is most dramatically present as a cosmology of elemental forces, where the intermingling of heaven and earth is most immediately visible. In mountains, one can see earth rising up into heaven, and heaven seething down into earth in the form of dramatic sunlight and mist and stormy skies. And so, ancient artist-intellectuals saw in the wild forms of mountain landscape the workings

of the Cosmos not as abstraction, but at the intimate level of immediate experience. As it is where existence reveals its most dramatically cosmological dimensions, mountain landscape opens consciousness most fully to the depths of those dimensions. There are, therefore, countless Chinese paintings of mountain landscape, and very often they include figures gazing out at lakes, cliffs, blossoms, moons, empty skies, rivers. Or most likely, as in the Shih T'ao painting: gazing out at mountains.

Shih T'ao was himself a restless wanderer and climber of mountains. He lived in the aftermath of the "barbarian" takeover that brought vast destruction and an end to the Ming Dynasty, and his paintings were often autobiographical. So we might assume that this painting,* with its mountains and ruined city, is of Shih T'ao himself. And in the deepest artistic sense it is. But more literally, it is a painting of Shih T'ao's friend Huang Yan-lü. A poet completely forgotten except for his association with Shih T'ao, Huang Yan-lü adopted the personal name Yan-lü, meaning Inkstone-Wander, because of his devotion to travel and writing (inkstones were used to grind ink for writing with a brush). After the fall of the Ming, many artist-intellectuals remained loyal to the Ming and the lost ideal of native Chinese rule. Inkstone-Wander and Shih T'ao were among them. As an act of resistance, Inkstone-Wander took a long journey visiting many sites

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* For detailed information about this little-known painting, grateful acknowledgment is made to Jonathan Hay and his *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*.

famous in the struggles against foreign invaders that conquered the Ming Dynasty and, half a millennium earlier, the Sung Dynasty. Inkstone-Wander commissioned Shih T'ao to paint those sites, and to inscribe on each painting the poem Inkstone-Wander wrote at that site. For Shih T'ao, it was an opportunity to express his own disdain for the foreign usurpers and sorrow at the lost Ming Dynasty.

But it was even more a chance to deepen his art as spiritual practice a little more, for underlying this painting's political dimension is its more fundamental spiritual dimension: a figure gazing out at mountains, taking in their teachings. In painting Inkstone-Wander, Shih T'ao was painting his own political sentiments; but even more, he was painting the wisdom that has come from a lifetime of landscape practice. So at this spiritual level, the figure is more Shih T'ao than Inkstone-Wander. And we too are clearly meant to identify with the figure, to gaze into landscape with the clarity he seems to have, a clarity cultivated through spiritual practices that involved mountain landscape.

That clarity is a beginning place, and almost as soon as this empty gaze into the nature of things reveals existence vast and deep, it reveals something else no less wondrous and unimaginable: there is no distinction between empty awareness and the expansive presence of existence. They are whole, a single existential tissue, which is to say that existence-tissue is our most fundamental self. Mountain ridgelines, mist, winter-charred trees: it's magic, isn't it,

the way existence opens through our eyes into awareness, filling us with its form and space? Magic the way there is no distinction between inside and outside, no *I* separate from everything else (though in describing it, our language insists on that separation)? Here in the beginning, there is this existence-tissue open to itself, miraculously and inexplicably aware of itself, when there might just as well be nothing but opaque existence, existence blind to itself! Vast and deep, everything and everywhere—the sheer presence of materiality is open to itself through our eyes, aware of itself here in the beginning. The story of existence is a self-portrait. And here for Inkstone-Wander, for Shih T'ao and for us, the self-portrait looks like this: ridgeline layered beyond ridgeline, paper-pale sky, bare winter-charred branch-tangles, sky-infused sea-mist, mist hiding broken city walls, abandoned houses and orchards and gardens.

2

IF WE STAY AND SHARE a little longer this distillation of Shih T'ao's lifelong landscape practice, if we keep gazing into the nature of things here in the beginning, mind still emptied of all assumptions, yet another remarkable and unexpected fact soon reveals itself. This miracle of existence does not end with its boundless presence. Things move. They change. The existence-tissue is alive somehow—magically, mysteriously, inexplicably alive! It is whole, but not complete, never complete. It rustles. It moves. And this is true not

just of the verbal actions in which this mysterious aliveness is most plainly visible in the world; it is also true of the things themselves. Our language contains rigid distinctions between noun and verb. Things are noun, static entities, an assumption that drains them of life because verb is the realm of life and movement. And because the structure of language is the structure of thought, we choicelessly experience the world this way. But in fact, everything is alive, in process, verb—and that is how the Chinese conceptual framework sees it. Indeed, that view is embodied in the language itself, where all words can function as any part of speech. That is, there is no rigid distinction between noun and verb, so things are not linguistically deprived of their "verbness," their life. In addition, while words in our alphabetic language have an arbitrary and distant relationship to things, which gives things the sense of static and lifeless abstractions, the pictographic nature of Chinese means that words share the nature of things as living phenomena. And so in Chinese, at the most fundamental conceptual level of linguistic structure, the existence-tissue is wholly alive—magically, mysteriously, inexplicably alive!

This suggests a very different concept of time. We in the modern West inhabit time as a metaphysical dimension, a river of future flowing through present and into the past. This grand metaphysical assumption about the world structures our immediate experience, but it is purely imaginal, and it creates a strange schism between us and the vast tissue of transformation that is reality. As

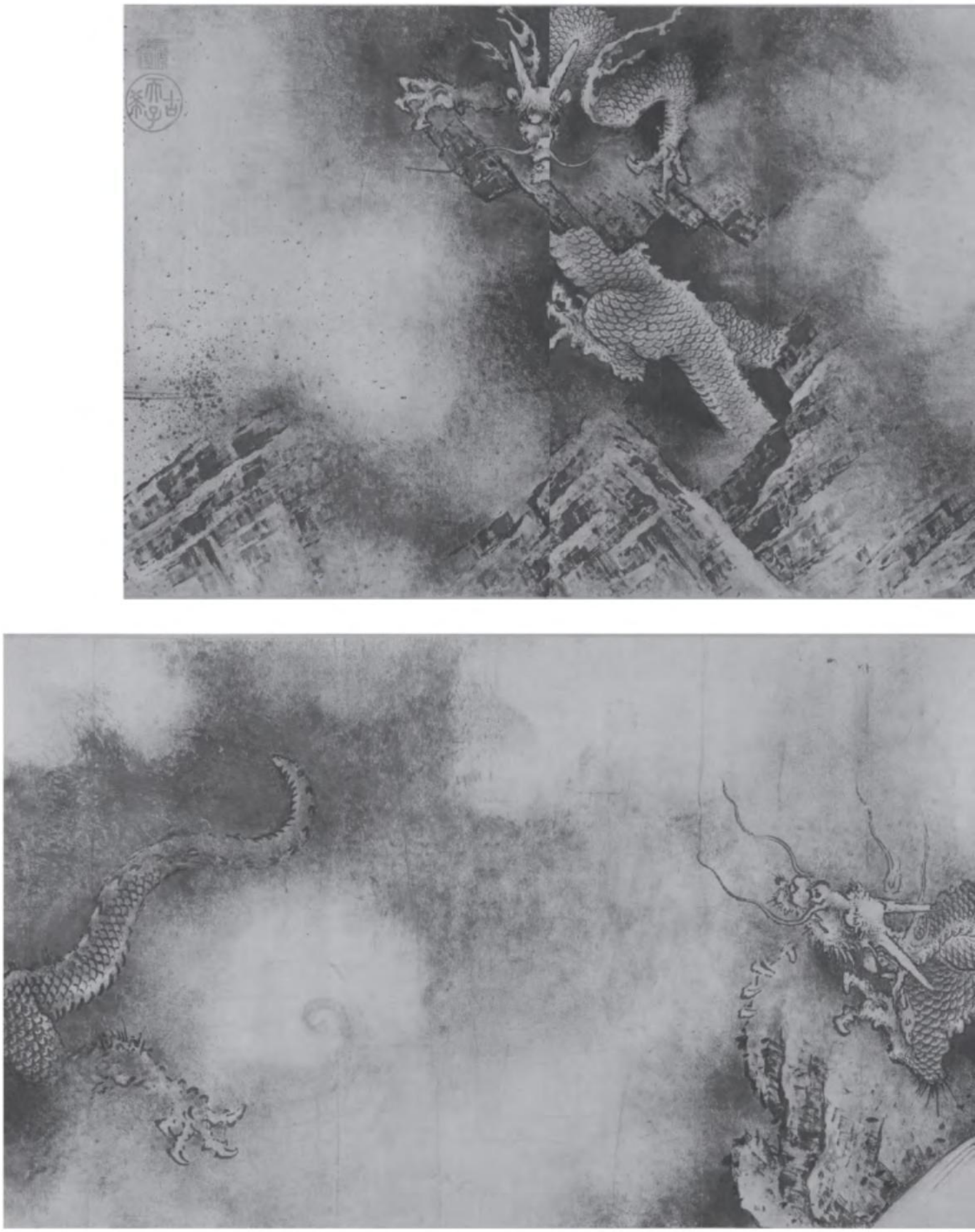
inhabitants of this linear time, we are located outside of existence. But there is no trace of such a dimension in empirical reality. Here in the beginning, all such ideas forgotten, we experience ourselves *inside* existence, and "time" is nothing other than the movement of change itself, an ongoing generative moment in which every thing (noun) is alive (verb) and pregnant with transformation.

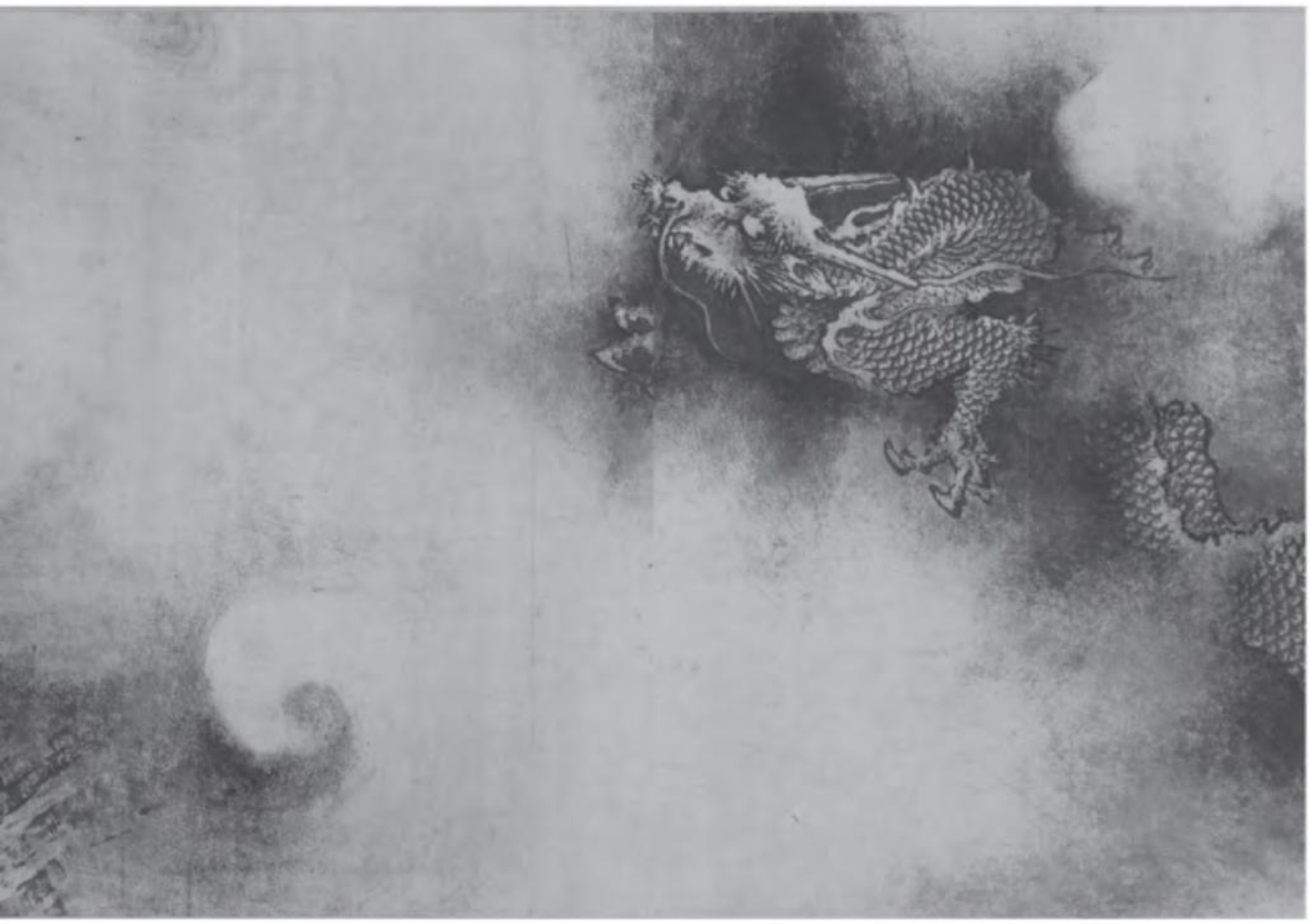
In that perennial moment, thoughts and memories appear and wander and slip away. Sea-mist drifts, ridgelines writhing and swelling, then eventually thins away. Valleys appear. Days pass into nights. Snows come. Seasons turn. Lives begin and end. Dynasties rise up and fall into ruin, like the Ming that was pillaged when northern "barbarians" overran China: cities plundered, villages razed, everyone in a last surviving branch of the imperial family murdered except a lone child who is miraculously spirited away from the slaughter by a servant, who is raised in a Ch'an monastery and eventually becomes Shih T'ao, "Stone-Waves," the great painter who spends his life wandering and making himself invisible, changing names and hiding his identity as a member of the Ming imperial family. Eventually, Stone-Waves declares himself in his painting of resistance. In the person of Inkstone-Wander, he hikes up to this mysterious place we can only imagine because painting and poem leave so much unsaid, this beginning place where a mountaintop far from people coexists with a broken city and its shattered houses. He stands there gazing out, and it is existence open to itself through its own empty awareness here in the beginning,

open to: A battered city-gate perhaps, hanging open, scavenged for firewood. A broken city-wall overgrown with weeds and gnarled trees, roots clutching at fissures in the stone wall. Scraps of curtain trailed out of ragged house-windows. Pears and apricots, frost-blackened reds and yellows sunlit in abandoned orchards. And in deserted gardens, a scattered confusion of chrysanthemums in ragged bloom: crimson, yellow, orange.

Vast and deep, everything and everywhere: existence is alive somehow—magically, mysteriously, inexplicably alive. Nothing holds still. The existence-tissue is pregnant through and through, subjective and objective a single generative tissue, all dynamic energy in perpetual transformation. This is the most fundamental nature of existence; and as we will see, it appears everywhere in the arts of China. But nowhere does it appear so directly or dramatically as in the twisting and tumbling form of dragon. Feared and revered as the awesome force of change, of life itself, dragon is China's mythological embodiment of the ten thousand things tumbling through their traceless transformations. Small as a silkworm and vast as all heaven and earth, dragon descends into deep waters in autumn, where it hibernates until spring, when its reawakening manifests the return of life to earth. It rises and ascends into sky, where it billows into thunderclouds and falls as spring's life-bringing rains. Its claws flash as lightning in those thunderclouds, and its rippling scales glisten in the bark of rain-soaked pines.

Existence, the Cosmos, the dynamic interplay of heaven and earth: it's all dragon, all generative transformation driven by a restless hunger, and every aspect of our subjectivity shares this dragon nature. Dragon is that vast mysterious existence-tissue given just enough form that we can *feel* it, its dynamic life writhing through its traceless transformations here in the beginning. The mountains in Stone-Waves' painting have the seething feel of this dragon, as do the mountains in Plate 9, which might be described as a dragon about to lift off and soar away on a vast wind. But there are in the painting tradition many magisterial images of the dragon itself, as in the spectacular *Nine Dragons* by Ch'en Jung, where dragon's protean body writhes in and out of view among rock and water, cloud and mist:





Ch'en Jung (13th century): *Nine Dragons* (1244). Detail.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

3

THE EXISTENCE-TISSUE is whole, but it is not complete, never complete. Sea-mist drifting, ridgelines writhing and swelling, dynasties rising and falling: dragon-form existence rustles, opening through awareness. It keeps moving, always moving. It's never satisfied. And there's more. Who could have imagined here in the beginning, all assumptions and ideas about things forgotten, here before all those assumptions ever existed—who could have imagined anything so unlikely and impossible? But it's true: this existence-tissue

wants to recognize itself, *wants* to celebrate and explain itself. It may seem recklessly anthropomorphic to speak of existence having *intentions* like this. But the concept of anthropomorphism presumes human consciousness is fundamentally different from everything else. The Cosmos is driven by its urges, and our human urges partake of those deeper movements, are particular instances of them, continuations of them. And what else could the restlessness of existence, its life, its constant motion of fact feeding on fact—what else could it be called but *hunger* or *want*?

Although this sounds suspect in the Western tradition, it is the cultural assumption in ancient China. As we will see over the course of this book, this assumption suffuses Stone-Waves' painting, and it appears explicitly as 意 (thought/intent) in the second line of the painting's poem:

搔	首	青	天	近	紫	虛
scratch	head	green-azure	sky/heaven	near	purple	emptiness

凌	高	四	顧	意	何	如
icy	height	four	views	thought/intent	what	like

意 might be translated provisionally as "thoughts" or "intentions," but here it is unclear where to locate these thoughts because the sentences lack subjects, which is

normal in classical Chinese poetry. On the one hand, the lines seem to be describing Inkstone-Wander's mental state as he scratches his head in wonder over the vast and empty heavens, feeling in an indescribable way the four limitless distances stretching out from the heights where he is standing. But the second line's grammar suggests *thoughts* could just as easily refer to the icy heights, or perhaps to the four vistas surrounding those cold mountaintop heights.

In fact, it is both of these possibilities simultaneously, for 意 is a philosophical term that refers to the "intentionality/intelligence/desire" that shapes the ongoing cosmological process of change and transformation. This is not intelligence in the sense of a divine presence. Instead, it is the inherent ordering capacity infusing the existence-tissue, and so it exists not in any divine or teleological way, but in an entirely empirical way, much as modern science describes with its fundamental principles and laws; though the rhetoric of science renders that "intelligence" lifeless, when it might just as easily and consistently be conceived as elementally alive. 意 is a capacity shared by human thought and emotion as well as wild landscape and indeed the entire Cosmos, and so it reveals the Chinese assumption that the human and nonhuman form a single tissue that "thinks" and "wants."

Indeed, the term meaning "culture," especially "literary culture," is 文 (*wen*), which originally referred to a design appearing on a surface (veins in rock, ripples on water), and 意 was the underlying force creating those

patterns. 文 applies in its largest sense to the patterns of the Cosmos, created by 意. Those patterns include such things as the patterns of stars, seasons, life and death, the diverse array of the ten thousand things, and finally, as another of those "natural" patterns, civilization: philosophy, writing, calligraphy, painting, etc.

Existence, when there might just as well be none: the sheer presence of materiality, vast and deep, everything and everywhere. Existence rustles. It wonders. It wants to recognize itself, wants orientation. It must, for it evolved animals like us that feel compelled to do such things. Recognition, orientation: how could it begin? A cairn, perhaps. Stones gathered, the largest few settled on flat earth, and the rest built up from there: slowly, one stone at a time, keeping things whole. A cairn is mute and elemental as empty awareness. It orients. It recognizes, and means in a sense everything around it, for where does it end? Its extent includes all of that elsewhere. It recognizes, but says nothing. Nothing about the landscape it orients around itself: distances of rivers and mountains. It orients and recognizes, and yet remains empty in a strange way, for it is about everything other than itself. It seems perfect, seems complete and still and whole celebrating the existence-tissue here in the beginning.

It's the simplest place in the world, this beginning, for the complications of memory and identity, thought and story and myth are perfectly absent. And it makes sense that the earliest art forms would be close to this beginning place, the existence-tissue just learning how to

4

THE EXISTENCE-TISSUE is made of hunger. It rustles. It is alive, forever moving and changing. It wants to recognize itself, wants to celebrate and explain itself, to understand the bottomless depths contained in the surfaces of appearance. And in its hunger, it evolved language and thought. In the modern West, linguistic thought is experienced in a mimetic sense, as a stable and changeless medium by which a transcendental soul represents objective reality. This sense of language assumes language did not evolve

out of natural process, but that language is instead a kind of transcendental realm that somehow came into existence independently of natural process. In ancient Greece this was associated with the advent of writing, which was just beginning to reshape consciousness, creating a seemingly changeless interior realm of the soul. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it was part and parcel with a god-created soul: Adam was created by God as a soul already endowed with language, presumably the language of God, since they spoke from the beginning and of course God created the universe by speaking commands, and so language was a transcendental medium that predates the appearance of humans as physical beings on earth. That god may be gone now; but when language functions in that mimetic sense, it still embodies an absolute separation between mind (soul) and reality, and that separation defines the most fundamental level of experience.

The history of language in China reveals that language was not experienced as a mimetic separation by the ancients, by Stone-Waves or Inkstone-Wander gazing out across ridgelines in the painting. They recognized language as an organic system evolved by the existence-tissue, as the existence-tissue describing and explaining itself. In the cultural myth, language begins in China with the hexagrams of the *I Ching*, such as the first two, *Heaven* and *Earth*: