Chapter Nine

The balance of darkness and light: selected works from 1952 to 1955

Calligraphy and painting are like strong medicine: they can cure those with illness and prevent illness in those who are not ill.¹

Through painting the landscape Huang Binhong followed historical artists in creating an ideal world, detached from or abstracted from reality, governed by geomancy (fengshui 風水) and dominated by the symbolic motifs of mountains and water (shan 山, shui 水). On a philosophical level painting enabled the scholar-artist to understand his place in the cosmos through the interaction of yin and yang, which in painting are solid and void, darkness and light. According to traditional Chinese thought, all life is governed by this fundamental principle.

Chinese brush and ink painters drew on historical models, type forms and brush techniques to produce an image of the natural world. The best artists, especially those who lived long, like Huang Binhong, transformed the historical models, painting their own paintings, drawing on their own life experience. Solitary figures, or a pair of figures in conversation, animate many of Huang Binhong’s paintings, giving them a self-reflexive dimension as an abstract synthesis of thought and feeling. Painting was the means by which Huang Binhong nourished mind and spirit. Like martial arts, which Huang Binhong practiced from a young age, it was a highly disciplined, physical art, a manifestation of the artist’s life-breath (qi 氣) and an emulation of the vitality or life-breath of the cosmos. Painting and calligraphy benefited from a strong, healthy body. In the process of creation, a concentration of energy was channelled from the mind through the arm to the wrist. (Figure 9.1) The best paintings were made when there was a harmony between mind and hand. After close to nine decades of practice, painting and

¹ Huang Binhong, letter to Zhu Yanying, January [1955], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.32.
calligraphy were second nature to Huang. Through the process of externalizing his innermost thoughts and feelings by entering into the painted landscape he believed good health and longevity could be achieved.

In the inscription on a 1934 painting of the Sichuan landscape Huang made the connection between the munificence of mountains and waterways and physical longevity. “There is a village of elderly people in West Guan County in Sichuan, where there are quite a few people who are 120 years of age. The luxuriance of the mountains and rivers provide them with nourishment.”

In Chinese culture both the link between painting and longevity and the positive effect of landscape on life expectancy is well documented. The idea was powerfully articulated by the Ming artist and theorist Dong Qichang (董其昌, 1555-1636):

The Tao [Dao] of painting, which is to hold the entire universe in your hand, [means] that before your eyes nothing is lacking in vitality, and therefore painters often attained great longevity. As for the stiff and detailed paintings, they are truly the slaves of material objects and are capable of reducing one’s longevity for they are lacking in vitality. Huang Tzu-chiu [Huang Gongwang, 1269-1354], Shen Shih-t’ien [Shen Zhou, 1427-1509], and Wen Cheng-chung [Wen Zhengming, 1470-1559] all attained a great old age, while Ch’iu Ying [仇英, 1494/5-1552] had a short life span and Chao Wu-hsing [Zhao Mengfu] only lived to a little over sixty years. Although Ch’iu and Chao were not of the same caliber, both were men of routine traditions who failed to see painting as a means of expression. The school of using painting as a means of expression began with Huang Kung-wang.

Huang Gongwang was one of the key artists Huang Binhong sought to emulate as a young man, as we have seen in Chapter Five.

Many Chinese scholar artists indeed lived to a great age. In the contemporary period, Qi Baishi and Huang Binhong are good examples. They join Michelangelo (1475-1564), Titian (ca. 1485-1576), Turner (1775-1851), Monet (1840-1926), Matisse (1869-1954) and Picasso (1881-2

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2 Huang Binhong wenji, tiba bian, p.82.
1973) as artists for whom there is a compelling connection between continuing creativity and longevity.5

From 1952 to the end of 1954, Huang Binhong pursued an independent artistic style that had little to do with the subject matter and ideology promoted by the new Communist regime. The large volume of works he produced suggests a renewed interest in painting. He continued to take his inspiration from the art of the past, his travels in Sichuan and Guangxi, his ancestral home in Anhui and his new home by the West Lake in Hangzhou. His late paintings are shaped by his familiarity with brush and ink technique, old age and the increasing deterioration of his eyesight.

Huang Binhong’s late works have aroused intense debate and historians of Chinese art remain divided in their judgement. Some passionately believe that the late works are Huang’s most important paintings, while others regard them as little more than ungainly and chaotic marks made by an old man who had passed his prime.6 If we consider this body of paintings not only as late works made at the end of a long life, but also, as works made at a time of revolutionary change within Chinese society, they acquire a different significance.

We must ask what motivated Huang Binhong to paint more works between 1952 and 1954 than at any other stage in his life, and what the paintings mean in the context of their time as well as in the context of Chinese culture as a whole? To address these questions I have chosen a number of dated paintings from a large body of work.

The inspiration of Northern Song art: substantial and resplendent

Many of the paintings that Huang made during 1952 include, in their inscriptions, references to Northern Song painting technique and to later artists from the Yuan, Ming and Qing who also looked back to the Song for inspiration. As a high point in art and culture, the Song dynasty was a limitless source of inspiration for the artist. By referring to art and artists of the past Huang Binhong was able to articulate a complex conceptual framework for his own

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6 For an overview of art historical responses to Huang Binhong’s late paintings, see Kuo, *Transforming Traditions in Modern Chinese Painting: Huang Pin-hung’s Late Work*, pp.2-3. See also, Shi Chongpeng, “Lue you xiaci de Huang Binhong,” *Xiandai yishu lun* 1 (1947), p.16.
practice, based on a respect for indigenous intellectual and artistic traditions. The paintings of 1952 are more consistent in approach than earlier landscape paintings made in Beiping, and viewed in the context of contemporary cultural politics they appear increasingly confident and defiant.

A handscroll dated 1952, dedicated to Wu Ming, shows Huang continuing to experiment with freely painted landscape imagery.\(^7\) (Figure 9.2) Like many of Huang Binhong’s earlier handscrolls it represents the journey of a solitary figure through the landscape. The primary elements of the landscape are outlined with fluid, dark ink lines and overlaid with layers of long and short brush strokes and dots using various tones of ink and colour. The painting flickers with colour, energy and movement. The inscription distills the received wisdom of past art:

Fine but not slender, thick but not undisciplined.
Life-breath is conveyed through the strength of brushwork and resonance by the colours of ink.

Paintings of the Northern Song are substantial and resplendent \([\text{hunhou huazi}]\), manifestations of the accomplishment of the Six Canons of Painting.\(^8\)
Layer after layer of dots and wash, often up to one hundred before a work is completed.
I have painted this handscroll on and off for many years . . .

The layering of brush strokes was a characteristic of Northern Song painting that inspired the Yuan artists Huang Gongwang and Ni Zan. In an inscription on another painting Huang likened the effect of their brush technique to the marvellousness of walking in the mountains at night. (Figure 9.3)

Huang Dachi’s [Huang Gongwang] brushstrokes are contained within his use of ink, whereas Ni Yulao’s [Ni Zan] ink is contained within his brush strokes. This is the substantial resplendence \([\text{hunhou huazi}]\) of Northern Song artists’ [painting], with layer upon layer [of brush strokes], so dense and profound that viewing their paintings is like the marvellousness of walking in the mountains at night. Ni and Huang excel in conveying nature’s majesty and power.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) The painting, now in a private collection in Hong Kong, is dedicated to Master of the Yicui Pavilion.
\(^8\) The Six Canons of Painting \((\text{liufa})\) were articulated by Xie He (ca. 500) in \textit{Gu hua pin lu}. The most important of the canons is ‘qiyun shendong’.
\(^9\) Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum, dated 1952 (ZPM 24808).
A related but darker painting again makes reference to the painting techniques of artists of the Northern Song and the stained ink technique.\(^{10}\) (Figure 9.4) Huang explained the ze or stained ink method saying “you must be able to see the trace of the use of the brush, for example beside the dark ink (nong mo) there is pale ink. The dark represents brushwork, and the pale area ink.”\(^{11}\) The technique was perfected by Meidaoren (Wu Zhen 吳鎮, 1280-1354), Wen Zhengming and Zhao Shibiao.\(^{12}\) Huang’s painting is an extreme and dramatic composition in which the mass of the mountains bears down heavily on the two figures in the pavilion. Huang strips a Northern Song landscape painting back to its essential elements, applying layers of ink brush strokes and dots of various intensities of light and dark and wet and dry ink to convey the darkness and profundity of the Sichuan landscape. His brush strokes have a wild and chaotic quality that ultimately coheres in the finished work. The oppressive painting is suffused with an unsettling, almost violent energy, expressive of complex emotions completely at odds with the official atmospherics of China’s contemporary political situation.

Other paintings by Huang in 1952 employ bold calligraphic lines and use scorched ink and an abbreviated painting style.\(^{13}\) One example incorporates bright mineral green and red ochre pigments and he experiments with using a dry brush to rub the surface of the painting. (Figure 9.5) The dry scorched ink creates a dark shaded zone that approximates the effect achieved by wash or pencil shading.

**The inspiration of Dao-Xian (1821-1861)**

Inscriptions on other paintings from this period refer to the art and calligraphy of the Daoguang (道光, 1821-1850) and Xianfeng (咸豐, 1851-1861) periods of the late Qing dynasty. Huang felt that the scholar-artists of this time had been overlooked and in the last years

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\(^{10}\) See Huang Binhong wenji, tiba bian, p.61. For a related painting, see “Elephant Washing Pond,” collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 24137), reproduced in Huang Binhong hua ji, 1992, plate 28.

\(^{11}\) Huang Binhong wenji shuhua bian, xia, p.445. For an undated painting inscribed “Using the stained ink method to paint landscape of travels in Sichuan. Binhong” see Wang Bomin, Qian Xuewen, eds., Huang Binhong hua yu lu tu shi (Hangzhou: Xiling yinshe chubanshe, 1997), p.94.

\(^{12}\) Huang Binhong “Hua tan,” in Huang Binhong wenji, shuhua bian, xia, p.163.

\(^{13}\) Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum, dated winter 1952. Huang left out the character “wo”, which he records in a note at the end of the inscription. Much like the accidental drops of ink and creases in the paper that occur often in Huang’s late works, this is a good example of Huang’s lack of affectation and the naturalness that he prized. For a stylistically related painting see Zhongguo jin xiandai ming jia hua ji: Huang Binhong (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1996), p.11.
of his life he concentrated his efforts on researching their contribution to art and scholarship. He was attracted to their interest in epigraphy and their study of inscriptions on bronze and stone, which led to the re-invigoration of calligraphy and painting.

In a letter to Liu Zuochou, Huang outlined his interest in the Dao-Xian era:

During the Daoguang and Xianfeng periods there was a renaissance in painting. In Guangdong [Yue] there was Xie Lifu [謝里甫], Wu Hewu [吳荷屋], Song Guangbao [宋光寶], Meng Litang [孟麗堂], and in Jiangnan Bao Shenbo [包慎伯]. Zhao Huishu [趙懋叔], Weng Songchan [翁松禪] and Wu Kezai [吳慰齋]. Epigraphy has really opened art to new possibilities. If one grouped them and showed the eminence of their works, there would be over one hundred people. I am planning to compile this information and expound on anecdotes and in the process raise the cultural level. But it is a great shame that decades of warfare have destroyed so much. Today, it is only in out of the way places in Beijing and Shanghai that one can see things.14

Like the artists of the Daoguang and Xianfeng periods, Huang also advocated the re-invigoration of contemporary art through the examination of ancient scripts cast in bronze and carved in stone and objects uncovered during archaeological activity. As we have noted earlier, he published many articles on epigraphy and amassed a collection of Chinese seals and rubbings.15 He championed the work of artists who lived one hundred years earlier on the basis of their ability to mediate and transform the art of the past. His concern to document artists who had slipped from public consciousness into obscurity perhaps also reflected his own extreme old age and a hope that a similar fate would not befall his own posthumous reputation.

In the inscription on a bold calligraphic painting Huang Binhong links the paintings of the late Qing calligrapher He Shaoji (何紹基, 1799-1873) with the spirit of the Northern Song.16 (Figure 9.6) He Shaoji was one of the most important calligraphers of the nineteenth century, creating an individual style based on a serious and systematic study of stone inscriptions from the Northern Wei (386-534) and Han (206 BCE-220) periods. Huang’s work is created from dark and pale ink and depicts a man crossing a bridge on his way to visit another

14 Huang Binhong, letter to Liu Zuochou, [1954], Huang Binhong wenji shuxin bian, pp.321-322.
15 Zhao Zhijun, ed., Huang Binhong jinshi zhuanyin congbian (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1999).
who is seated quietly in a simple dwelling. Huang started this painting with a brush fully loaded with ink and proceeded to paint until the brush was almost dry, before loading it again with more ink and continuing. The process of exhausting the ink in the brush before replenishing it is a calligraphic one and produces a harmonious balance of wet and dry brush strokes. The same process was repeated with paler ink. The eye follows the rhythm of the brush which Huang Binhong has wielded as naturally as he breathes.

In a striking painting which exhibits even freer and more abbreviated brushwork Huang cautioned against seeking an individual style too early. (Figure 9.7)

… Studying the techniques of the ancients, you should not take leave of them too early. Hu’er’s [Huang Sheng] brushwork is so powerful it is like a bronze ding.

In discussing Hua Xinhuo’s [Hua Yan] paintings, critics said that he sought to take leave of the ancients too early.

I can believe that Bao Anwu [Shichen], Zhao Huishu [Zhiqian] and other virtuous men of the Daoguang and Xianfeng periods did in fact surpass men of earlier times. 17

Bao Shichen (包世臣, 1775-1855) and Zhao Zhiqian (趙之謙, 1829-1884) were important scholar-artists who developed individual calligraphic styles based on the study of early Chinese writing. Huang Binhong appreciated the practiced brushwork of calligraphers who turned their hand to landscape painting. 18 This work is a good example of Huang’s reductive, calligraphic late style. Through the abstraction of form and an expressionistic use of ink, colour and void he creates a powerful painting imbued with energy and life that is palpable and of the moment. He is showing his ability to transcend the work of earlier artists.

In another very different work Huang Binhong has used highly saturated brush strokes that when placed close together read as large areas of ink wash, creating zones of mid-grey to balance the high contrast of the dark scorched ink and white paper ground. 19 (Figure 9.8)

Elsewhere he uses a very thick brush to outline generic features of the landscape, creating a fantastic misty ambience through the layered application of watery daubs of mid-grey ink wash.

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17 Hu ‘er shanren was the artist name for Huang Binhong’s ancestor Huang Sheng (b. 1622).
18 During the Daoguang period, Bao Anwu painted many landscape paintings for which he developed a following. See Zhongguo meishujia renming cidian, pp.151-152. For other paintings by Huang Binhong with references to Bao Anwu’s calligraphy and landscape painting, see Huang Binhong huaji (1985), plate 32; Huang Binhong huaji (1992), plate 25. For information on Zhao Zhiqian, see Joseph Chang, Thomas Lawton, Stephen D. Allee, Brushing the Past, pp.94-97. For related works by Huang Binhong, see Huang Binhong juewei huaji, plate 12, and Huang Binhong huaji (1992), plate 21.
19 Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 24098).
The overlapping brush strokes give the impression of moving mist as ink and colour are applied to areas of ink that were are not fully dry, creating a blurred effect that enhances the heavy atmosphere. The inscription adds to the mood:

A small boat enters a rivulet deep within the mountains.
Mist envelops and dampens my sleeves.
It is as if I am within the painting.
I let my spirit roam.
It is as if I have become Xihuangsangren [羲皇上人 the legendary ruler Fu Xi 伏羲]
I painted this work on the spur of the moment.

In a seamless historical continuum the inscription takes us into a mental world filled with thoughts of the distant past, legendary figures and places of great natural beauty as Huang travels backwards in time in order to bring the energy of the past into his life and into the present.

Among the most poetic paintings from this period is a short handscroll titled “Lakeside house in the sunshine after rain” painted for Huang Jusu in 1952. (Figure 9.9) In the centre of the painting a scholar, accompanied by an attendant, gazes out at the viewer from a boat on the lake. The figure is surrounded by trembling, scorched ink brush strokes that quiver with movement and life. Washes of mid-grey ink and pale blue/green and ochre give the painting a sense of naturalism. The vitality and spontaneity of the brush strokes surely catch the artist’s own experience of observing the West Lake after rain. At the focal point of the painting is a zone of calm where it is possible to contemplate the marvelous life force in nature.

**West Lake as subject**

In 1953 the West Lake and the immediate environment of Qixialing became an increasingly important subject for the artist. Many of the published and dated paintings from the first half of 1953 make use of dark, jet-black ink and spirited, calligraphic lines, and the inscriptions are shorter with less art historical references as if Huang’s failing eyesight led him away from historical models to turn inwards and focus more intently on the development of his

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20 Compare the brushwork of this painting with the painting reproduced in *Huang Binhong huaji*, 1992, plate 20, also dated 1952 and dedicated to Wu Ming, and a painting dedicated to Yicui ge [Wu Ming] in the same volume, plate 22.
own artistic style. The concentration of West Lake and Qixialing imagery shows him using his immediate physical environment as a stimulus as he had done during his earlier periods of travel.21

A painting dated “Spring 1953” gives a good indication of Huang’s painting style at the beginning of that year.22 (Figure 9.10) In this dark painting a tiny, lone figure begins his ascent of a mountain, heading in the direction of a temple or pavilion half way up that is barely visible. Huang has used a combination of wet and dry brush strokes to outline the structure of the rocky mountain and a few hoary old pine trees. The contrast of black and white that dominates the painting has a strong graphic quality. The highly simplified brush strokes and the short inscription of blunt characters suggest a work that was made with failing eyesight.

Another painting titled “Fishing Boat on the River” also dated “Spring 1953,” uses similarly thick, abbreviated brush strokes, but with a much lighter palette.23 (Figure 9.11) Daubs of intense mineral green and ochre wash evoke the atmosphere of spring. The broken lines suggest that Huang’s brush was so worn it had very few hairs left. The marks are made by the bamboo support as much as by the hairs, as if direct contact with the paper made the process of painting somewhat easier.

A less disciplined painting which also pre-dates the cataract operation is freely painted with layers of dancing wet ink brush strokes that suggest the Hangzhou landscape after rain.24 (Figure 9.12) This painting shows the volumetric solidity and tonal variation that one brush stroke by a well practiced hand using antique ink of high quality can achieve. To counterbalance the visual effect of the wet ink, however, Huang Binhong overlaid the painting with a fine web of dark, rubbed textural strokes. The light, almost transluscent quality of the painting contrasts with the strong, blunt characters written with a worn out brush that form the inscription:

Heavy mist lingers after a night of rain
This is a scene from the Xiling Lake.

21 See also paintings reproduced in *Huang Binhong huaji*, 1985, plates 6 and 10, and *Huang Binhong huaji*, 1992, plate 17.
22 Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum.
23 Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 24008). For a painting from the same time period and using a similar technique, see *Huang Binhong jingpin ji*, plate 63.
24 Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 24235).
Even though his vision was impaired Huang Binhong remained in control of brush and ink and was able to create paintings that were suffused with light.

Huang’s great sensitivity to colour and his ability to mix subtle warm and cool hues, despite his failing eyesight, is apparent in a small, impressionistic painting inscribed (Figure 9.13):

The many mountain peaks of Shangxiang village, Yandang [Mountain]
A record of travels thirty years ago.25

Huang Binhong suggests the form of the mountain and a cluster of dwellings through a series of short, disconnected dark ink lines supported by broad daubs of pale pink and green-grey and areas of void. Here ink, colour and void are given equal value and create an interlocking, balanced whole. The different layers of ink and colour add up to the final image as in colour woodblock printing. Pigment applied to areas that are not yet dry has caused a blurred effect, giving the impression of a mountainous area remembered after an interval of some thirty years. Contrasting textural effects have been created by the use of old colour (suse) and a fine web of dry “flying white” brush strokes. This painting is as much about the technique of painting as it is about place and memory. Failing eyesight forced Huang to rely on poetic sentiment and images formed in his mind’s eye.

A group of small paintings, all dated 1953, which appear to have been created at a similar time or as part of a series, are good examples of the calligraphic and highly abbreviated painting style that Huang Binhong achieved at the very end of his life.26 Huang’s familiarity with brush and ink technique and with his subjects inject an incredible freedom and spontaneity to these paintings. The most abstract paintings in the group is inscribed (Figure 9.14):

Below the Qixia mountain ridge there was once a Peach Blossom Spring.
Today it is but a trickle and a pathway runs along its side.
This is what I have painted.

In this painting Huang uses the motif of the Peach Blossom Spring to evoke the idyllic retreat of the famous recluse Tao Yuanming, in relation to his own dwelling below the Qixialing Ridge.

25 Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 24246). Huang Binhong travelled to Yandangshan in 1931. See his diary for this trip in Huang Binhong wenji, zazhu bian, pp.596-597.
26 For examples, see Chu, ed., Homage to Tradition, plate 57; Huang Binhong huaji (1992), plates 15, 16, 17; Huang Binhong jingpin ji, plate 62; and Jin xiandai mingjia, plate 21.
The forms of the landscape are distilled to such an extent that it is almost impossible to isolate individual elements. The whole is painted with highly energized, short, swiftly executed lines and dots, varied only by the extent of the darkness of the ink or the dryness of the brush. Despite the apparent chaos, a circulating energy field gives the painting an internal coherence. Huang applied so much ink to this painting that it lies on the surface of the paper, unable to be absorbed, creating a highly textured effect.27

The most resolved of the group is a small painting of a sailboat on a river with foreground trees and distant islands and mountains.28 (Figure 9.15) The painting has the fluency and clarity of calligraphy. The inscription reads:

Fan Zhongli’s [Fan Kuan] paintings have layer upon layer [of brush strokes] creating an impression of depth and solidity.

There is not one among the tens of thousands of brush strokes that is not simplified.

This painting represents a pinnacle of Huang Binhong’s late period, abbreviated brush paintings. He invokes Fan Kuan, the great Northern Song master of monumental landscape painting, whose paintings he had seen and admired in the collection of the Palace Museum. Huang takes the principle of simplified brush painting to its limit here, creating graph-like symbols for the features of the landscape. Each element—the trees, rocks, boat distant mountains, foliage and cloud—is described with a minimal number of brush strokes, each nonetheless suggestive and expressive.

Cataract operation

Having suffered from deteriorating eyesight since the late 1930s, Huang was admitted to the People’s Hospital in Hangzhou in June 1953. His doctor advised that the cataract was sufficiently mature to operate.29 The procedure, pioneering at that time, was described by Huang as a Western technique (xi fa 西法). After the operation he could once again “read books and

27 Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 24013). In this and other paintings the scorched ink has been so thickly applied that it has transferred onto the back of the scroll when rolled up.
28 Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum.
29 Huang Binhong, letter to Wu Ming [1953], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, pp.74-75. See also Huang Binhong, letter to Zeng Xiangting, quoted in Wang Zhongxiu, Huang Binhong nianpu, p.552, and Kuo, Transforming Traditions in Modern Chinese Painting, pp.167-173.
see mountains,” but he was physically weaker and was hospitalised again for a time in order to regain his strength.\textsuperscript{30} He wrote to Guo Xuchu the following year describing his situation:

From summer until autumn I was at the People’s Hospital, for an extended period of three or four months. Thankfully, I received help from comrades at the East China Federation of Literary and Arts Circles and the Artists’ Association. I have been very frugal and have done all I can to return to my original condition. I am painting again, but I have to use both 1,000 plus and 500 plus diopter glasses because the right material is not here in Zhejiang [to suit my particular needs]. So I am now using a hand-held magnifying glass which makes painting difficult. But being able to see the paintings that I previously made groping about in the darkness I feel triumphant, which has done much to relieve my low spirits. Soon I intend to go to Shanghai for an [eye] test and to have some proper glasses made.\textsuperscript{31}

The cataract operation had practical and symbolic significance in liberating him from the haze that had shrouded his vision for many years. The procedure allowed him, at the age of ninety, to create a new body of work that marked the culmination of a life of artistic enquiry. A group of paintings with neatly written inscriptions are likely to be the works that he painted after he had recovered his health. Compared to his earlier paintings they are careful, rather detailed paintings through which he tested the new clarity of his vision.\textsuperscript{32}

One such painting is inscribed (Figure 9.16):

Qixia Ridge [near the] West Lake originally had a Peach Blossom Spring.
Now it is blocked, obscured by houses and gardens
I painted this work while resting there.\textsuperscript{33}

This painting is more realistic than the abstracted work of the same subject, discussed above painted prior to the operation. (Figure 9.14) Huang creates solidity and density through layers of dots, with pale, rainbow-like colour wash adding to the naturalism. Some of the dots were wet and were applied to not yet dry ink, creating a bleeding, misty effect. Huang was painting as if to prove that in his ninetieth year he could still produce a complex and nuanced painting.

\textsuperscript{30} Huang Binhong, letters to Wang Cong, \textit{Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian}, pp.48, 51.
\textsuperscript{31} Huang Binhong, letter to Guo Xuchu, [1954], \textit{Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian}, pp.309-310.
\textsuperscript{32} See also paintings reproduced in \textit{Huang Binhong jingpin ji}, plates 64, 65, 66; and \textit{Huang Binhong huaji} (1992), plate 6.
\textsuperscript{33} Collection of the National Art Museum of China. Compare this work with a painting reproduced in \textit{Huang Binhong jingpin ji}, plate 67. See also \textit{Huang Binhong wenji, tiba bian}, p.47.
A similarly painterly yet precise work depicts figures in a secluded lakeside compound. (Figure 9.17) Form is built up by layer upon layer of ink dots and veils of ink and colour wash. In the inscription Huang succinctly summarises his philosophy of painting, based on a synthesis of ideas and techniques from the past.

The mountains and rivers are solid and substantial [hunhou] and the grasses and trees lush and resplendent [huazi]. The techniques of Dong [Yuan], Ju [Ran] and the two Mi’s [Mi Fu and Mi Youren] may be regarded as coming from the same school. [In the paintings of] famous artists of the Song and Yuan dynasties there is void within the solid and solid within the void. The force of the brush conveys life-breath and the colour of ink conveys resonance. During the Dao [Daoguang] and Xian [Xianfeng] periods of the Qing dynasty epigraphy flourished. Large seal script, Small Seal script and Clerical script [Li] are distinct and were all used for text carved onto stone tablets. Truly great calligraphy and painting should combine the strengths of them all. These are the wise words of the Ancients. They represent true inner beauty.\(^{34}\)

Huang draws our attention to the concept of inner beauty (nei mei 内美), which he says may be found in the ancient scripts engraved in bronze and carved on stone. According to Huang inner beauty or neimei is a spirit or an aura the source of which lies within, “in the bones”. It is a force that is concealed rather than overt, exerting a deep and lasting influence.\(^{35}\) Inner beauty is allied to the yin of feeling and inwardness and is opposed to the yang of direct observation and refers to a moral beauty rather than a physical beauty.\(^{36}\) It is the latent strength at the heart of calligraphy and painting and is for Huang Binhong the ultimate aesthetic.

Following the cataract operation Huang Binhong returned to a more simplified style characterised by an emphasis on dotting and wash techniques. Huang wrote to Liu Zuochou:

In recent years there has been a gradual change in my painting style [away] from the study of Northern Song. I have accumulated some works that I am particularly pleased with, in terms of dotting and wash technique.\(^{37}\)

\(^{34}\) Collection of the National Art Museum of China.
\(^{36}\) Yi-Fu Tuan, Passing Strange and Wonderful, pp.132, 240-241.
\(^{37}\) Huang Binhong, letter to Liu Zuochou, [1954], Huang Binhong shuxin bian, p.322.
This change can be seen in two works that show a much lighter, more ethereal and nuanced approach to painting. The first is dated “Autumn 1953” and must have been painted some months after the cataract operation. (Figure 9.18) It is inscribed:

A record of a view I [once] saw while walking to see the Hupao Spring at Nanping. Huang Binhong has sketched in the basic features of the landscape in concise and angular brush strokes, then used pale ink and colour wash to block in the landscape. Dots of intense orange pigment highlight the flowering tree and areas of pale orange wash imbue the painting with an autumnal air. The atmosphere is hazy and conveys the misty landscape of Hangzhou. The confident and precise calligraphy of the inscription attests to the artist’s renewed health and vision.

In a companion painting, also dated “Winter 1953,” a small figure, painted in pale-grey ink and barely visible, crosses a bridge and heads toward a path marked by what appears to be a ceremonial archway (paifang). (Figure 9.19) The painting is inscribed:

Spontaneously painted after looking at mountains and reading books.

Huang had spent much of his life reading and looking at and walking in the mountains. In his ninetieth year and in increasingly frail health he continued to roam in the mountains through painting, distilling his life of travel and historical enquiry. As the Song dynasty painter Guo Xi (郭熙, ca. 1020-90) observed, “the wise man’s yearning for woods and streams is aroused by the existence of such beautiful places”. (Figure 9.20)

In the 1950s the beauty of the landscape was increasingly forsaken for massive engineering projects, such as the building of dams and power stations. These and other man-made structures, symbolic of progress and modernity, came to dominate contemporary landscape painting. In this context, Huang’s depiction of a ceremonial archway is of particular interest. Paifang were Confucian symbols, erected to celebrate filial piety, the achievements of

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38 Huang Binhong hua ji (1992), plate 9.
39 Li Shutong (1880-1942) became a monk at Hupao in Hangzhou in 1918 and adopted the Buddhist name Hongyi. Li and Huang knew one another. There is a letter from Hongyi to Huang in the archive at the Zhejiang Provincial Museum.
scholars and the virtue of chaste widows. There were numerous such archways in Shexian. After 1949 they were among the “old” structures that the Communist Party identified for elimination. In the words of Mao Zedong:

Buddhist idols must be thrown away by the peasants themselves; ancestral tablets must be smashed by the peasants themselves; shrines for virtuous women and memorial arches glorifying chastity and filial piety must be destroyed by the peasants themselves. 41

When he painted the paifang—rare in his work—was Huang Binhong also aware of Mao Zedong’s abhorrence of these reminders of a “feudal past”, so much part of the Shexian landscape?

After his cataract operation Huang Binhong also experimented with the highly saturated ink and wash techniques that were well suited to the depiction of atmospheric effects in the Lower Yangtze River Valley region, especially the West Lake, where he lived.

One such painting, inscribed “Mountain and bridge seen through a warm haze” is a languid scene of people strolling across an arched stone bridge while others are out boating on West Lake. (Figure 9.20) The foreground landscape is clearly defined with calligraphic lines articulating trees, rocks and the lake edge. As the landscape recedes it becomes less distinct and the transitions between mountain, mist, lake and mountain are blurred. Huang applied a watery solution of ink wash to ink that was not yet fully dry to create the free flowing effect of moving cloud and mist.

Huang Binhong gave Fu Lei a painting which displays the highly saturated ink wash technique that he was now using. (Figure 9.21) It is inscribed:

Cloudy lake and mountains after the rain, Autumn 1953. For Mr Nu’an [Fu Lei] who visited me [at my home] below Qixia Ridge, whereupon I picked out this old work to present [to him] in respectful teaching.

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The painting depicts pleasure boats on the West Lake that represent activity and that contrast with an empty pavilion and a large, solitary tree that symbolize contemplation, drawing attention to the difference between activity and inactivity, solid and void, noise and calm. The mood is somber despite the rose-coloured wash of sunrise or sunset.

Some of Huang’s paintings at this time were dark and even turgid. Huang’s friend Chen Shutong criticised his reliance on old or overnight ink which, diluted with water, became rather flat.

Each year I have been fortunate to receive calligraphy and paintings from you. Many make use of overnight ink. From now on I would urge you to use freshly ground ink in order for there to be a contrast between dark and light ink and a luminosity of ink, Chen wrote. He questioned the change in Huang’s artistic style, encouraging him to create fine brush paintings that were less heavy:

I received with respect your letter and various paintings, from which I can see that your brushwork is strong and healthy. It crossed my mind that there may be some traces of Gong Banqian [龔 半 千 Gong Xian 龔 賢]’s dense, dark and splashed brush technique in your work. Do you have a desire to combine the work of Shitao and Banqian? Aren’t you being misguided? In Beijing, whenever I obtain your early works in dealers’ shops, I find a purity of spirit that reverberates in them. They are superlative, untrammelled works [yipin 逸 品]. Banqian and Shitao also painted fine brush paintings. Previously you gave me an album of paintings of Yangshuo and a hanging scroll which are stylistically different from your current works. Why did you change your style?

It is clear that Chen preferred Huang’s earlier, more precise paintings to the late works, which he found dark and heavy. Chen was a close friend and supporter, and also a highly placed political leader. He had difficulty understanding the aesthetic of Huang’s late works and the motivation behind them.

42 Chen Shutong, letter to Huang Binhong, 17 December [1953], quoted in Wang Zhongxiu, Huang Binhong nianpu, p.543.
Auto-biographical art

The cataract operation gave Huang Binhong a new lease on life. In their diversity of form and content the many paintings dated 1954 confirm Huang Binhong’s renewed energy as he made a concerted effort to create a body of works to stand as a summation of his artistic practice.

In a letter to Zeng Xiangting (曾香亭) written in the summer of 1954, Huang gives advice and talks of the stimulus he received from reading and viewing historic artworks.

It is impossible to read too many useful books and even more impossible to look at too many paintings by scholars with refined taste. The light of the eyes is like electricity, illuminating the great and the small. This is the way of research. Otherwise it is like being in a room without light and not being able to find the way out. I am in a constant state of vigilance and do not dare relax or be lazy.44

At the age of ninety-one Huang continued to be stimulated by art and ideas. The accumulated practice and achievement of the past or ‘tradition’ gave him energy and sparked his imagination. As before he used the standard repertoire of type forms that historically constitute scholar-artist brush and ink painting. But his curiosity and his inventiveness with technique and with composition ensure that every painting is different. Perhaps the most striking shift in his late painting style was his increasing exploration of the plastic possibilities of dots, wash and dry brushwork that we have noted. (Figures 9.16 to 9.21)

In one painting Huang Binhong depicts tall old trees in a misty valley.45 (Figure 9.22) At the lower margin of the painting two tiny figures stand by a river, dwarfed by trees and mountains, silhouetted against a halo of white void, that gives them an other-worldly presence. At the top of the mountain there is a cluster of dwellings, presumably a temple complex.

The different motifs that constitute the painting—river, trees, mist and mountain—are melded together by layers of watery ink and colour wash. On top of the layers of wash Huang

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44 Huang Binhong, letter to Zeng Xiangting, Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.197. Fou Ts’ong remembers Huang Binhong’s eyes as bright, sparkling, alive, and penetrating. Conversation with Fou Ts’ong, London, 30 September 2002.
45 Collection of the National Art Museum of China (Guo 00941).
applies short strokes of scorched ink to the trees and mountaintops for greater visual contrast, accentuating the illusion of depth.\textsuperscript{46}

A stylistically very different painting refers to the landscape of Lingui 臨桂, a short distance southwest of Guilin.\textsuperscript{47} (Figure 9.23) In the inscription Huang mentions the beauty of the karst caves for which Lingui is famous. The caves caused him to recall a familiar place in Jinhua, where he was born and spent the early years of his life:

The karst caves at Lingui are a place of great natural beauty. Binhu in Jinhua has long been eroded by sand and gravel, today you can travel there by boat. Binghu refers to the Binghu caverns in Jinhua which are regarded as one of the thirty-six lesser Daoist cave-heavens (dongtian 洞天). This dark painting uses a distinctive dry-brush rubbed technique, relieved by passages of void that highlight key motifs within the painting. The halo of white light around the two figures gives the painting a mystical atmosphere. The taller figure gestures upwards in the direction of the open pavilion, suggesting perhaps a site for enjoying the landscape, or for meditation, as if beckoning the viewer to another realm.

In many paintings Huang depicts tiny figures deep within mountains. The subject is often an encounter between two figures, one ascending and the other descending a mountain. The encounters suggest dialogue and journeying. Invariably the figures are silhouetted against a void which, against the darkness and density of the landscape, reads like an aura. Paintings such as these, while informed by a geography of place, have an association with the Daoist concept of nature. They are interior landscapes rather than actual depictions and suggest mystical encounters within the profundy of the natural world. A fine example, which literally transcends place, is inscribed with only “Binhong aged ninety-one”.\textsuperscript{48} (Figure 9.24) The mysterious quality of the landscape is enhanced by the halo of light, the chiaroscuro rubbed technique, the lack of clear lines or dots, and the chinks of light that counter the density of the mountain.

\textsuperscript{46} For a painting that makes use of related dot, wash and ink techniques, see Huang Binhong juewei hua ji, plate 10.
\textsuperscript{47} Collection of the National Art Museum of China (Guo 00572).
\textsuperscript{48} Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum. For a discussion of this painting, see Luo Jianqun, Jiujiang yu Zhongguo minghua: Huang Binhong, pp.68-69.
In a small dark painting titled “The idea of a painting of the mountains at night” Huang Binhong depicts the gateway to a secluded mountain villa.49 (Figure 9.25) There are no people and the darkness of the mountain emphasises that it is a night scene. And yet within the dark and heavy mountain, created through the accumulation of successive short dots and brush strokes, there are areas of light and washes of naturalistic colour. In this painting Huang alludes to the substantiality of Northern Song painting and the mystery of mountains, heightened when experienced at night.

Another dark landscape painting is inscribed (Figure 9.26):

Goulou Mountain in Beiliu, Guangxi, where it is said the old immortal Ge [Ge Xianweng] picked herbal medicines.50 Ge refers to Ge Xuan (葛玄, 164-244 CE) a Daoist from the Kingdom of Wu 吳 during the Three Kingdoms Period who practised on Hezao Mountain 皁山 in present day Qingjiang 清江 county in Jiangxi Province. His Daoist name was Ge Xianweng 葛仙翁.51 Mount Goulou was not far from Beiliu, which was Chen Zhu’s ancestral home. Huang and Chen had travelled there in 1928.52 In this work the mountain consumes almost the entire pictorial area, creating a heavy and rather claustrophobic image. Old Immortal Ge, identified by the cauldron for brewing herbs which is visible in the back section of the dwelling, looks out from an open pavilion deep within the mountains.

The quest for long life is central to Daoist thought and was aided by herbal decoctions, alcohol, meditation and breathing excercises. Activities such as playing the lute (qin 琴), chess (weiqi 围棋) and painting were also regarded as beneficial to health and longevity. As a ninety-one year old Huang Binhong was not surprisingly drawn to the depiction of such a subject. But in the 1950s, Daoist practices were regarded as “superstitious” and symbolic of the “feudal”

49 Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 24294). For a discussion of this painting see Luo Jianqun, Jujiang yu Zhongguo minghua: Huang Binhong, pp.64-65. For another painting of night mountains, see Huang Binhong juwei hua ji, plate 8.
50 Collection of National Art Museum of China (Guo 00556). For a discussion of this painting see Luo Jianqun, Jujiang yu Zhongguo minghua: Huang Binhong, pp.92-93. This painting is very similar to a number of works dated 1952 that we discussed earlier, see Figure 9.4.
51 See Cihai, p.1369. Ge is Pueraria thunbergiana, a creeping, edible bean, the fibres of which can be made into linen-like cloth and the roots of which are used in herbal medicine.
52 In his final years Huang Binhong painted many works that were inspired by his earlier travels. Examples include “Reading Terrace” in Guilin, 1954 chongti (Huang Binhong jingpin ji, plate 72) and “Yangshuo landscape,” 1954 (Huang Binhong jingpin ji, plate 71).
past. Nor was the blackness of the landscape easily reconciled with the positive and colourful imagery promoted by the Communist Party. In paintings such as this Huang withdrew into an increasingly interior world of ideas and philosophies that gave him spiritual nourishment and support, transcending the immediate reality of contemporary China.

**Jinhua and Shexian**

A group of paintings from 1954 that refer to the landscape of Shexian and Xin’an artists take us back to Huang Binhong’s place of birth and his ancestral village. In one painting he makes specific reference to the innovative painting style of the Xin’an artist Cheng Sui. (Figure 9.27)

Dry, cracking autumn wind heralds spring rain.

Goudaoren [Cheng Sui] transformed the styles of Yuan artists Wang Huanghe [Wang Meng] and Meihua’an [Wu Zhen 吳鎮] to create a new artistic style that was truly innovative.

Today I try to paint such a work.

Inspired by Cheng Sui’s example, Huang Binhong has painted a secluded compound in the wilderness where a solitary figure sits cross-legged, gazing out from his thatched roofed studio. A large pine tree towers in the foreground asserting its primacy and longevity. Its verticality is echoed by a waterfall issuing from high in the mountain. The pine tree bisects the painting into two distinct zones, differentiated by the techniques used. To the left of the pine tree is the natural, timeless zone of the mountain and waterfall, painted with dry, rubbed brush strokes. To the right is a constructed precinct of the scholar recluse, carefully outlined with a spare dry brush. The recluse has chosen to adopt nature as his teacher and live deep within the mountains. Man is depicted within the context of nature, for it is nature and not man that is imbued with eternal life.

After a lifetime spent researching the art of Xin’an artists and their artistic antecedents, Huang Binhong was in a position to claim authority over them all. At the age of ninety-one he

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53 Many of these paintings are in the collection of the National Art Museum of China. See Huang Binhong jingpin ji, plates 69, 84, 86, 92, all of which are dated 1954.

54 Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 21689). For a discussion of this painting, see Luo Jianqun, Jujiang yu Zhongguo minghua: Huang Binhong, pp.84-85.
had learned all he could and, like Cheng Sui, had reached the point of departing from accepted methods to reach a position of no-method and establish his own artistic style.

Another group of paintings in a loose and calligraphic style take the rivers of Shexian as their subject. One inscription alludes to the spontaneity of stimulation that was responsible for so many of Huang’s paintings. (Figure 9.28)

The Fishing Terrace in Zhengshi Mountain is situated between the Jian and Feng Rivers [in Shexian]. Raising my head and looking into the distance and in high wind,

I painted this on the spur of the moment.

The figures in the painting are illuminated by a halo of bright white light, serene in their quiet discussion. In their mountain setting they are far removed from the reality of the times, which encouraged communal activity in modern industrial environments. It was decades since Huang had travelled to Shexian. This painting is a fond reminder of the scholar ideals from those bygone days.

In 1954 the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art responded to the Communist Party’s change in strategy for artistic production from “popularisation” to the “raising of standards”. What had been called the Painting Department (huihua xi 绘画系) was divided into the specialisations of oil painting colour and ink painting (caimohua 彩墨画) and printmaking. Huang Binhong was invited to give a demonstration of brush technique to young teachers in the newly-formed ink and colour creative workshop at the academy (caimo hua chuangzuo shi 彩墨画创作室). As Fang Zengxian (方增先, b. 1931), then a post-graduate student, recalls, Huang Binhong fascinated students with his unique painting technique. He used a brush with a tip about one and a half inches long, a sheet of xuan paper, an ink stone full of ink and a bowl of clean water. Fang remembers that:

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55 Song Zhongyuan, ed., Yishu yaolan, p.28. The head of oil painting was Li Binghong, the head of colour and ink painting was Zhu Jinlou and the head of printmaking was Zhang Yangxi. See also Andrews, Painters and Politics, p.134.
Every time he dipped his brush in ink it soaked up all the dark ink it could. He then proceeded to paint with the brush held perpendicular to the paper. When the brush was dry, he dipped the tip into the glass of water and allowed the brush to fill with clean water, and then continued painting, again with a vertical brush. When the brush became dry he filled the brush with water from the tip and continued in this manner until the ink in the brush gradually became paler. It was not until the ink was totally pale that he dipped the brush in the ink again and continued painting. From beginning to end, every time the brush made contact with the paper it was upright and he painted with the central tip of the brush. Hence Huang Binhong’s landscape paintings are composed from zhongfeng brush strokes.56

The resulting painting was replete with dark, light, wet and dry brush strokes and at the end of the process the bowl of water was still clear. Huang used the water not to wash the brush, but to draw water into a dry brush. It was a technique that he had perfected, in which ink was not wasted and the painting was imbued with a natural range of ink tones and textures that reflected, and was governed by, the breath and the process of painting itself.

That same year, Huang created an ambitious landscape painting with the inscription:

Observing the landscape I took out some paper and painted quickly in the wind and rain,

What is not conveyed by the brush is expressed by the life breath.

Art academy colour and ink creative workshop.

This may have been the painting that Huang Binhong painted before Fang Zengxian and other young graduate students at the academy to demonstrate brush technique. (Figure 9.29) The painting displays modulated ink tones ranging from dark and wet to dry and light, reflecting the natural, almost organic way that Huang constructed his paintings. Finally Huang added pigments to the painting to demonstrate the technique of using realistic colour for the newly-named Colour and Ink Department.

In September 1954, the East China Artists’ Association mounted a display of over one hundred works by Huang Binhong. The exhibition, initiated by Lai Shaoqi (賴少其, 1915-

2000) head of the Association, was held at the Shanghai Cultural Club for one week. Huang donated the exhibited works to the State. Responsible for the nation’s cultural legacy, the Communist Party extolled particular national traditions and institutions and demonstrated its respect for historic material culture by establishing libraries, museums and institutions for the protection of cultural relics (Wenwu baoguan hui 文物保管會). Perhaps Huang’s gesture was intended to reflect his appreciation:

It pleases me that in recent times there has been interest expressed in [gathering] material for the research of the nation’s literature and art. I have already donated more than one hundred works. They have been transferred to Beijing by the East China Arts Association. Artists both within China and overseas believe that the creative practice of combining the legacy of the ancients and of nature with the general line can be of assistance in serving the people …

The Chairman of the Chinese Artists’ Association was Xu Beihong. Jiang Feng and Ye Qianyu (葉淺予, 1907-1995) were vice-chairmen. The association had the appearance of a popular organisation, but was in fact a cultural arm of the Chinese Communist Party. Jiang Feng was the Communist Party representative who wielded ultimate control. According to Yu Feng (郁風, b. 1916), who was the office manager from the inception of the association and ultimately the chief curator of exhibitions, the Chinese Artists’ Association was not officially allocated a budget to collect artworks until some time after the move into their new premises in the China Art Gallery in 1962. Huang Binhong’s remarks, however, suggest that that prior to the provision of a budget for the formation of a collection the Association was gathering works by senior artists for research purposes. There was no market for traditional style brush and ink painting in the early 1950s, and many artists were encouraged to donate their works. Huang Binhong’s “donation” reflects a genuine desire for his art to be seen as relevant, and to find its place in an institution that would ensure its preservation.

57 Wang Zhongxiu, Huang Binhong nianpu, pp.552-553. See also Zhao Zhijun, Huajia Huang Binhong nianpu, p.180.
58 Huang Binhong, letter to Zeng Xiangting, summer 1954, Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.196.
59 Andrews, Painters and Politics, p.36.
60 Yu Feng, conversation with the author, Beijing, 12 November 2001.
Fu Lei attended the opening and was asked to talk at a seminar. In a letter to his son, Fou Ts’ong (傅聰, b. 1934), he reported on the event but expressed some misgivings.

The East China Artists’ Association organised a solo exhibition for Huang Binhong. The opening was yesterday afternoon. There was also a seminar. I attended. The paintings were extraordinary. More than one hundred recent works. Even though they were very dense and dark, they had a profound depth. Many of the works looked very detailed from afar, but when you looked up close the brush strokes were actually very thick. This kind of technical skill is what I call great art [shang pin 上品]! I was given no option by Lai Shaoqi but to talk at the seminar. What I said was basically: 1) Western and Chinese painting have developed in such a way that they are now following the same path; 2) From the point of technique and foundation, Chinese artists should look to study Western artists, for example, drawing from nature and from plaster casts, etc.; 3) Chinese and Western artists should look at and learn from each others’ paintings; and 4) An artist in any department should be interested in what other artists are doing. More than half of those who spoke praised the artist. I really do not think that this is the function of a seminar. There were too many words of praise, it was really annoying.

Yesterday morning before the meeting Mr. Huang came to the house at 8.30am. Yesterday at the seminar I met many old friends from the world of brush and ink painting such as He Tianjian, Liu Haisu, etc. They all said Mr Huang often speaks of me to them, and says that I am someone who has truly understood his art.62

For Fu Lei the sycophantic behaviour of participants made the official gathering meaningless and devoid of scholarly merit. Fu Lei’s view that contemporary Chinese and Western artists were following an essentially similar path and that Chinese and Western artists should be aware of and learn from one another’s art would have been familiar to Huang Binhong from their long years of artistic dialogue. In fact Fu Lei’s ideas exerted a subtle but important influence on Huang Binhong’s artistic development, as we will see in the following chapter and it is no surprise to learn that Huang regarded Fu Lei as one who had truly understood his art.

62 Fu Lei, letter to Fou Ts’ong, 21 September 1954, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, xia, pp.350-351.
Fu Lei and Huang Binhong’s late painting style

In a letter written the year before Huang Binhong’s death, Fu Lei praised a group of paintings that he had recently received in the mail:

You could describe your painting style as that which has “gained vigour with age”. The two long narrow paintings have strong brushwork that is as graceful as a dragon and a snake dancing in the wind and yet arresting. But the small album that is painted only using thick brush strokes in which you cannot make out specific forms comes close to European/Western Cubist and Fauvist art. I am not sure what your intention was or what you were aiming for. From my observation great artists from all over the world continually strive for the best, unwilling to place any restrictions on themselves. You are not an exception. I wonder what you make of my ravings? Perhaps they are inaccurate.63

The following day Fu Lei wrote to Huang again:

This time you have sent a great many paintings. The last two days I have been extremely busy and I did not have time to look at everything. Now I have carefully looked at all of the works. There are some real masterpieces in the small and medium sized albums. You have removed all traces of colour and yet not lost the feeling of moistness and suppleness. The brushstrokes are wild but the scenes are clear. Only a great master could achieve this. This quality of painting forms part of a long tradition in China. After the Yuan dynasty it was only the Ming recluses who derive from the same origin. In the West it has only been in the last eighty years that people have begun to understand this. For this reason I mentioned in my last letter to you that in terms of physical appearance your paintings share similarities with Cubist and Fauvist paintings. In terms of the spirit they [i.e., the West] are still not as good, their philosophy is not as well developed nor as ancient. The foundations are not as solid and therefore it has been difficult for them to depict the realm beyond the physical.64

Further on in the letter Fu Lei referred to the thickness of the pigment on many of the paintings that Huang had sent:

The mineral blue and green pigment that you have used in the paintings seems to be lacking in gum. When it arrived in the mail I opened the roll and much of the pigment fell off. I ended up with green powder all over my hands and what was left on the paintings was almost nonexistent (all you could see were a few green marks where the

63 Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 28 April 1954, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang, p.134.
64 Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 29 April 1954, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang, pp.134-135.
pigment had been), which has damaged the surface of the paintings and is a cause of great regret.⁶⁵

No response from Huang Binhong has been published, or appears extant. Fu Lei perceived a convergence of artistic styles between Huang Binhong’s paintings and Cubist and Fauvist art, including the thickness of the pigment he was using, when he viewed Huang Binhong’s late paintings. By 1954 Cubism and Fauvism were virtually canonical, neither contemporary nor controversial in the modernist West. Fu Lei intended to flatter Huang by suggesting that his painting could be read in the context of modern international art. At the same time he re-iterates a common Chinese view that Western painting is inferior when it comes to the depiction of the spirit. It was a sentiment with which Huang Binhong would have agreed.

Eugene Wang has argued that points of confluence between modern Western and Chinese art may be found through *xieyi hua* 写意畫, which he describes as “sketch conceptualism”. Sketch conceptualism he says “implies an underlying assumption that such a painting serves only as a means, by way of a highly abbreviated, sketchy forms, to evoke conceptual overtones and spiritual resonances beyond formal tangible properties”.⁶⁶

Wang has noted parallels between traditional Chinese sketch conceptualism and the work of Western modernist artists such as Matisse. Both styles of painting, he says, tend toward simplification and abstraction and renounce verisimilitude. In Wang’s words “the languid, loose and seemingly effortless quality of Chinese sketch conceptualism harmonises with the free-spirited European modernist temperament”.⁶⁷

In an inscription on a painting made in 1953, Huang Binhong associated the abbreviated brush technique of Northern Song with the sketch conceptualism of Yuan painting, his two most important models of artistic inspiration (Figure 9.30):

> The painting technique of Northern Song artists is abbreviated, but the ideas they express are complex.

> It is not a matter of the sparseness or density of forms,

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⁶⁵ Ibid., p.135.
⁶⁷ Ibid., p.110.
but the transformation of the idea.

The sketch-conceptualism of the paintings of Yuan artists is the same.

The abbreviation of painted form and the freedom inherent in the calligraphic line were the outward manifestations of the transformation of the idea that characterised Northern Song and Yuan painting. This allowed Fu Lei, and much later, Eugene Wang, to make the above comparisons.

A double page from a notebook among Huang Binhong’s personal papers in the archive in the Zhejiang Provincial Museum lists some of Fu Lei’s publications, including a series of art books edited by Fu Lei and Liu Haisu and published by China Books (Zhonghua shuju 中华书局) between 1932 and 1936. (Figure 9.31) The series comprised six individual volumes featuring the work of Derain (1880-1954), Van Gogh (1853-1890), Cézanne, Renoir (1841-1919), Matisse and Monet. The list also includes four French novels translated by Fu Lei and one Spanish work of fiction published in 1953. According to Fou Ts’ong, the list, in his father’s handwriting, may be a record of the books that Fu Lei gave to Huang Binhong during their years of friendship. It is likely to have been written during his last visit to see Huang in November 1954. (Figure 9.32) Huang Binhong’s interest in the intellectual world of Fu Lei extended to his involvement with modern Western art and his translations of French and Spanish literature. The notebook confirms Fu Lei’s key role in introducing Huang Binhong to Western art and literature, furthering his ideas about confluence between Eastern and Western art.

A manuscript by Huang Binhong entitled “European Painting” (Ou hua 欧 畫) gives a brief overview of Western art from ancient Greece and Rome through to his contemporaries, Henri Matisse and Vincent Van Gogh. The article is thought to be preparatory notes for the article “On Chinese Aesthetics” (Zhongguo huaxue tan 中國 畫 學 談) published in the Special Magazine on National Painting (Guohua yanjiuhui tekan 国画 研究 特刊) in 1924. It has a particular focus on art techniques, which are categorised as the black and white arts of charcoal, pencil and ink drawing, and colour techniques which encompass fresco, tempura, pastel, oil painting and water colour. A separate paragraph is devoted to line work, mentioning Albrecht

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68 Fou Ts’ong and Patsy Toh, letter to the author, 2 April 2005.
69 Collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 04355). This is the view of Wang Zhongxiu. See Huang Binhong wenji shuhua bian, shang, pp.189-193.
Dürer and Henri Matisse. Artist’s names and art techniques in English are added to the manuscript in pencil, running alongside the Chinese character transliterations. The English script is extremely fluent and would appear to have been written by a native English speaker or someone with a high degree of English proficiency.

The article for which the notes were written explores ideas associated with Eastern interest in Western art and Western interest in Eastern art. Huang concludes with the comment:

Confucius said “Learn the new by reviewing the old” (wen gu er zhi xin 溫故而知新). Europeans also said “There is no new thing under the sun”. All that is new today will be old tomorrow, and yesterday’s old things will be the new things of today. The new comes from the old, there is nothing old that is not new.\textsuperscript{70}

These writings confirm Huang’s early interest in western art and comparative art history and illuminate Huang Binhong’s and Fu Lei’s ideas about the fundamental similarities shared by great art no matter whether from the East or the West.

It is difficult to know which paintings Fu Lei was referring to in his letters to Huang Binhong.\textsuperscript{71} One work dated 1952 that was in Fu Lei’s collection depicts two men in a hut engaged in conversation and surrounded by lush spring foliage. It is a spirited painting that is inscribed “Lake and Mountains in Spring” (Hu shan chun ai 湖山春霧). Huang has reduced the elements of the landscape to calligraphic lines and dots and areas of pale ink and colour wash. (Figure 9.33) The abbreviated brush strokes, and the energy created by the combination of ink and colour, and solid and void is what caused Fu Lei to make an association between Huang Binhong’s late paintings and modern western art. Another painting, dated 1954 and dedicated to Fu Lei, depicts a figure with a Chinese zither (qin) seated on a mountain. The dark, monochrome palette and contemplative subject, together with the bold and simplified brush strokes, create an image of interior dialogue and physical transcendence. (Figure 9.34)

\textsuperscript{70} Huang Binhong wenji shuhua bian shang, p.191. Huang Binhong was referring to a quotation from the Bible, Ecclesiastes, chapter one, verse 9: “The thing that hath been, is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.” Thanks to Maxine McArthur for this reference.

\textsuperscript{71} Fu Lei and his wife Zhu Meifu took their lives on 3 September 1966, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Their collection of artworks was confiscated by the state. Some of the art works were returned to family members after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Fou Ts’ong and Patsy Toh, letter to the author, 2 April 2005. Some paintings dedicated to Fu Lei and originally part of his personal collection are in the collection of the Shanghai Museum.
Photographs taken in September 1954 show Huang Binhong at the age of ninety-one sketching at the Feilaifen, Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou. (Figures 9.35) Huang stands tall and alert with his eyes fixed on the landscape. Zhu Lesan (朱樂三, 1902-1984), another teacher at the art academy, stands by his side. With his left hand Huang holds a small notebook and with the right hand he draws the scene that is before him. But drawing from life, as understood within the context of Chinese tradition, is in fact an art of synthesising what is observed with what has been experienced and what is known through study. The many notebooks that Huang Binhong had filled in his lifetime reveal the process of artistic translation that occurred as he looked at and rendered the landscape. In sketching what he saw, he drew on technical and art historical knowledge accumulated over a lifetime, from other artists’ representations of the landscape. What he saw was not only the landscape, but also the application of artistic principles and abbreviated techniques developed by artists over millennia to record physical phenomena.

In the Huang Binhong archive at the Zhejiang Provincial Museum there is a small notebook with a red cover embossed with a design of five-pointed stars. (Figure 9.36) It was most probably a gift from one of his high-ranking friends. The five-pointed star was a symbol adopted by the Communist Party to represent the five dominant ethnic groups that constitute the Chinese nation.72 The book contains pencil sketches of famous sights near West Lake and opens with a drawing that is entitled “Old Pine Beneath the Qixia Ridge” (Qixialing xia lao song 棲霞嶺下老松). Other drawings are identified as “Panorama of West Lake” (Xihu quan jing 西湖全景), “Broken Bridge” (Duan qiao 斷橋), “The Moon Reflected in Three Pools” (San tan yin yue 三潭印月), “Bai Causeway” (Baidi 白堤), “Peony Pavilion” (Mudan ting 牡丹亭) and “Lingyin Temple” (Lingyin si 灵隐寺). (Figure 9.35) Huang Binhong used simple lines to record the bones or structure of these famous Hangzhou beauty spots close to where he lived. The lines are drawn with strength and conviction, defining and containing space, and articulating void. Like his paintings, the drawings vibrate with the energy created by tension between solid and void. This may have been the sketchbook that Huang Binhong was using

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72 The five dominant ethnic groups of China are Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui and Tibetan.
when he was photographed in September 1954. It is unfinished, which points to its being his last.

Inside the back cover there is a pencil note “18 October met … President of the Presidential delegation from the People’s Assembly of the Republic of Romania …”. During 1954 many delegations and artists from countries with whom China had established diplomatic relations were invited to attend the festivities for the fifth anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic. That same month, Huang met visiting artists from Eastern bloc countries including Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Among them was Andrzej Strumillo (b. 1928), now recognized as one of Poland’s major artists. Strumillo travelled “all over China”. “My wide-open eyes and an urgent need for actions resulted in over 200 drawings that I made during the two month voyage,” he remembers. “I drew in China ink on Chinese paper using a Chinese brush-pencil as the main tool”. (Figure 9.37) Fifty years on, Strumillo continues to seek inspiration from Asian art and Chinese brush and ink painting. “The Orient has always been present in the works of Andrzej Strumillo, ever since his first visit to Asia in 1954,” observes Andrzej Wawrzyniak, the current Director of the Asia-Pacific Museum in Warsaw,

Andrzej Strumillo’s fascination with Asia embraces not only the world of forms originating in both nature and the extremely rich resources of the Oriental art, but also reaches out to the spiritual world, which is a spring of deep inspiration permeating the artist’s works of diverse types.

This would have heartened Huang Binhong, further confirming his belief in the points of confluence between Eastern and Western painting.

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74 Strumillo arrived in Beijing on 28 September as part of the 1954 cultural co-operation agreement between Poland and China. A viewing of his ink sketches from his travels in China was organised by the Chinese Artists’ Association, 15-17 November 1954. See *Meishu* 10 (1954), p.52, and 12 (1954), p.49. Strumillo met Qi Baishi in Beijing. In the Museum of Asia and the Pacific in Warsaw there is a painting by Qi Baishi that was donated by Strumillo following his 1954 visit. Joanna Wasilewska-Dobkowska, letter to the author, 30 November 2004.
76 Andrzej Wawrzyniak, “About the artist,” in *Andrzej Strumillo: Azja* (Warsaw: Muzeum Azji i Pacyfiku, 1997), p.5. I would like to thank Joanna Wasilewska-Dobkowska, Curator at the Asia-Pacific Museum in Warsaw, for sending me this catalogue.
In contrast to the darkness and heaviness of some of Huang’s late paintings a work inscribed “Painted in Autumn 1954, Huang Binhong aged ninety-one” is among those suffused with brightness and light. (Figure 9.38) It is a small, carefully limned, lyrical work executed in mid to pale grey ink with large areas of green and ochre wash, possibly depicting the approach to the artists’ home beneath the Qixia Ridge. Fluid lines articulate the primary forms of the painting which are then overlaid with layers of dots in various shapes and sizes of wet and dry ink. As in so many of Huang Binhong’s paintings, the subject is a tiny journeying figure, here about to cross a bridge which stands out in an area of void.

The journey may suggest the ultimate journey that Huang Binhong would soon make, departing from the physical. But unlike so many of his paintings which are dark and sombre in mood, this one has a brilliant effervescent quality that attests to the strength of Huang Binhong’s life force, even as he neared the end of his life.

The final paintings

Among the paintings that Huang Binhong created in the final years of his life are a number of large hanging scrolls depicting the landscape of Huangshan. One monumental painting was the centrepiece of the 1954 exhibition organised by the East China Artists’ Association in Shanghai.77 (Figure 9.39) In this work many components seen in earlier paintings have been brought together to create a complex environment of mountains, waterfalls, pine trees and waterways and structures where people could live, contemplate and enjoy nature. The limitations of Huang’s eyesight meant that he could only work on a small area at a time. The result is a series of small vignettes which together make up the whole. The painting, remarkable for the artist’s age, has an ambitious topographic quality. It is a summative, transcendental work that entreats the viewer to journey back to Huangshan and to be lost in the beauty and glory of nature. The inscription reads:

77 Other large paintings include one dated 1953 in the collection of the National Art Museum of China (CAG 00542), one in the collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 25653). There is also said to be a large painting of a similar size and painted in a similar style in the collection of the Ling yin she in Hangzhou.
[This painting of] Huangshan extends from Yuanming village, Yanggan Temple to Tangkou. Myriad ravines, wind in the pine trees, clear streams, and stone steps cut into rocks, beckon us to enter into the beauty of the landscape. Painted in the Northern Song style.

One of the few paintings that date from 1955 is a depiction of the landscape of Tangkou 湯口, an entry point for viewing some the most famous sites of Huangshan. This painting focuses on a corner of the landscape and stands in stark contrast to the majestic painting of 1954. (Figure 9.40) Two figures sit in conversation in a clearing in the forest against a rocky mountain backdrop. Our view of them is framed by two large pine trees and as in many of the paintings we have discussed it is as if a bright light has been shone on them in the darkness. Behind the figures steps lead up a small hillock to a dwelling nestled deep within the forest. Waterfalls tumble down into the void of a waterway, creating eddies of mist that act as pathways through the landscape. The painting is inscribed:

Tangkou is the entry point to the wonders of the landscape of Qianhai, the thirty-six mountain peaks, Heavenly Citadel Peak and Lotus Flower Peak [of Huangshan].

The painting is Huang’s final journey to Huangshan, the idealised environment of great beauty, mystery and profundity where humankind and nature could co-exist in harmony. It was the source of Huang Binhong’s artistic persona. Huangshan and the ancestral home of Shexian with which he identified so strongly became Huang Binhong’s ultimate place of return.

On 16 March 1955 Huang Binhong entered Hangzhou Number One People’s Hospital (Hangzhou diyi renmin yiyuan 杭州第一人民医院) after having complained of stomach pain in early February of that year. His condition was diagnosed as advanced stomach cancer.78 In the last months of his life he continued to paint for friends and visitors. (Figure 9.41)

Among the dated and published paintings made during the final months of his life is one dedicated to Zhang Wenjun 張文俊, a graduate student from the academy, who spent a number of days with Huang in January 1955. (Figure 9.42) Many years later Zhang published a

78 Zhao Zhijun, *Huajia Huang Binhong nianpu*, p.182.
recollection of their meeting. During the course of the time he spent with Huang, he observed him adding brush strokes of thick dark ink to paintings that he had made many years earlier, explaining that he was “correcting” paintings that he could now see were too insipid. It was a way of critiquing his own work. To “correct” his paintings, Huang could only add layers of ink, not subtract. This meant adding further definition that made the paintings darker and heavier than they were originally. Zhang recalls his amazement at seeing one very large work which was “as dark as a blackboard”. The painting was saturated with so many layers of ink that it was stiff to handle and when bent sounded like a sheet of iron. Huang said that the painting was intended for Zhang Bojun (章伯鈞, 1895-1969), a close friend of Chen Shutong’s from Tongcheng in Anhui, who would soon be famously denounced. Huang feared he would not be able to appreciate the painting and so kept it for himself.80

The painting chosen by Zhang as a memento is a dark and brooding landscape enlivened by large areas of mineral green wash. Stylistically the painting appears to be an earlier work that Huang had also “corrected” by adding layers of dark ink.81 The conscious application of layer upon layer of ink may be compared to the dense and cumulative layers of Chinese history. Through the repeated application of ink lines, dots and wash, Huang created meaning and substance and gave expression to deeply felt emotions. The layers of ink came to represent the culmination of his own life and of his understanding of the richness and substance of the Chinese painting tradition.

79 Published in Meishubao, 1 February, 1992, and cited in Wang Zhongxiu, Huang Binhong nianpu, pp.558-559.
80 In a letter from Chen Shutong to Huang Binhong dated 20 December 1954, Chen mentioned that Zhang Bojun liked Huang’s paintings and requested that Huang create a painting for him. See Wang Zhongxiu, Huang Binhong nianpu, p.557. Zhang Bojun was part of the inner leadership circle of the Communist Party. Zhang had studied in Germany and was an early member of the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party. He returned to China in 1926 and in 1928 left the Communist Party and with Tan Yanda and Tan Pingshan organised the KMT Temporary Committee for Revolutionary Action (Guomindang linshi geming xindong weiyuanhui). In 1933 together with Li Jishen he established the People’s Government of the Republic of China (Zhonghua gongheguo renmin remin zhengfu) in Fujian. In 1947 he re-organised the Chinese People’s Committee for Liberation (Zhonghua minzu jiefang xindong weiyuanhui) which became the China Peasant’s and Worker’s Democratic Party (Zhongguo nong gong minzhu dang), of which he was President. In 1949 he participated in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Zhongguo remin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi) After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China he was a Committee member of the Central Government (Zhongyang zheguo weiyuan), Minister for Transport (jiaotong bu bazhang) and Vice President of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Zhengxie guanguo weiyuan hui). See Cihai, p.4667.
81 This is one of four works that Huang gave to Zhang Wenjun. See Wang Zhongxiu, Huang Binhong nianpu, p559.
One of the few paintings that is dated 1955 that appears to be more or less contemporaneous with the date is dedicated to Huang’s old friend Chen Shutong.\(^2\) (Figure 9.43) The work is painted with a scratchy dry brush in which the forms of the landscape have been painstakingly built up, layer upon layer. The dryness of the brushwork is evocative of life and energy ebbing away. A lone fisherman animates the large expanse of void, a symbol of quiet reflection and calm. Stylistically it is similar to a large painting of a view from Xiling Bridge that Huang had made the preceding year. (Figure 9.44) In the inscription on that painting Huang quotes the Qing critic Wang Lianxin’s (王蓮心) appraisal of a painting by Kuncan (髡殘, 1612-1673), which suggests that Kuncan may have provided a model for this group of works.\(^3\) At the very end of his life Huang Binhong continued to be inspired by past masters of art; only through borrowing and experimenting with the brush and ink techniques of earlier artists was he able to develop his own, highly expressive style, so layered with historical meaning.

Not long before he died he wrote:

Over the years I have painted many thousands of paintings, including finished and unfinished works, and if I take into account those that were lost through moving, there are more than one thousand. I am not inclined not to seek money for them, and have not given them away lightly. There have been meetings and exhibitions [in which they have been displayed] and family and friends have acquired some of my daily exercises for reference and as mementos.\(^4\)

Huang Binhong had a practice of not inscribing, signing, nor adding seals to paintings unless they were being sent or given to friends or associates. He quite commonly added ink to paintings years after they were first worked on. This practice emphasised the process of making. While in his studio the paintings remained works in progress. Only when they left his hands was their final form determined.

Huang Binhong passed away on 25 March 1955 at the age of ninety-two sui. Among the many unfinished works in Huang Binhong’s studio at the time of his death, most likely made

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\(^3\) See Luo Jianqun, Ju jiang yu Zhonggup ming hua: Huang Binhong, p.124.

\(^4\) Zheng Yifu, letter to Huang Binhong, 26 January 1955, quoted in Huang Binhong nianpu, p.558. Zheng was from Ningbo. He had done considerable research on Xin’an painting and was expert at authentication. He worked at the Zhejiang Provincial Museum and retired to Shanghai. See Huang Binhong shuxin ji, p.634.
during the last years of the artist’s life, is an undated painting. A single figure gazes out from a pavilion situated over a watercourse deep within the landscape. (Figure 9.45) The same motif occurred in an album leaf painted in 1909. (Figure 9.46) The subject over the course of more than forty years is similar, but Huang’s treatment of the subject has been transformed. In the later painting the figure is so tiny as to be barely visible and his quiet concentration is almost totally obscured by the frenzied calligraphic strokes that surround him. Ink, colour and void contend for our attention with equal vigour. Brilliant orange-red pigment conveys autumn, heralding the onset of winter. The figure is contained within and appears to be at one with the landscape. The tension between the contemplative figure and the near chaos of the brush strokes expresses the challenge of maintaining inner peace in spite of external turmoil, finding a balance between darkness and light. For Huang Binhong that challenge had been lived.