Chapter Seven

The Beiping years: patronage and artistic experimentation

Relatively few dated paintings from Huang Binhong’s early years in Beiping have been published.¹ (Figure 7.1) In a letter to Huang Jusu, written in 1939, the artist indicated that he had few paintings in his possession. Many, he said, had been lost or stolen in his move from south to north and in the chaos that came with the Sino-Japanese war and the Japanese occupation.² So deeply concerned was he about the preservation of his paintings, that in 1938 he deposited a group of important works in a temple in Jinhua, his birthplace.³

Of the published paintings, many that date from the 1940s were painted for Huang Jusu, Wu Ming 吳鳴, and Liu Zuochou 劉作籌, Low Chuck-tiew, 1911-1993).⁴ At the time Huang Jusu was living in Hong Kong, Liu Zuochou in Singapore and Wu Liang in Macau. These three men were among Huang’s most important patrons. The many letters that they exchanged with Huang Binhong indicate a genuine and intense interest in his art and continuing financial support of his creative practice.⁵ Huang Binhong regularly sent them paintings, sometimes singly and at other times in bundles. Sometimes the paintings were intended for them, or were

¹ See Huang Binhong xiansheng hua ji (Hong Kong: Da Gong Bao, 1961) plates 25-44 for the period 1937 to 1939; Chu, ed., Homage to Tradition, plate 16, for a 1938 album of Huangshan.
² Huang Binhong, letter to Huang Jusu, [1939], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.230.
³ Huang Binhong, letter to Chen Zhu, undated, and Huang Binhong letter to Huang Jusu, [1939], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, pp.125, 230. In the letter to Huang Jusu Huang said that he wanted to stay in Jinhua, but returned north to avoid the humidity.
⁴ Wu Ming was from Guangdong. He studied western medicine and operated a business in Macau. He had previously studied painting with Huang Binhong. Liu Zuochou was born in Guangdong, but from an early age lived in Singapore. He studied economics at Jin’nan University in Shanghai and studied painting after classes with Huang. After graduating in 1936 he returned to Singapore and did not resume contact with Huang Binhong until 1946. In 1949 (Huang’s letter implies 1948) he was appointed Manager of the Four Seas Communication Bank Ltd. in Hong Kong (Sihaitong yinhang). See Chu, ed., Homage to Tradition, pp.21-23. See also Huang Binhong, letter to Huang Jusu, Huang Binhong wenji, shuhua bian, p.246. Other important patrons/collectors living outside China include Tang Tianru and Chen Jingzhao (1907-1972). Many works dedicated to Tang dated from 1929 to 1940 are included in Huang Binhong xiansheng huaji (Hong Kong: Da Gong Bao, 1961). Chen Jingzhao lived in Macau. His collection was recently auctioned in Beijing. See Zhongguo jinxian dai shuhua, Zhongguo Jiade 2004 qiuji paimaihui (China Guardian auction), Beijing 16 May 2004, vol.2, lots 793-795, 799-802, 806-817.
⁵ Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian includes fifteen letters to Wu Ming, forty-five letters to Huang Jusu, and three letters to Liu Zuochou.
commissions for close friends and colleagues who formed part of their intellectual network. Huang, Wu and Liu reciprocated by remitting payment to him. The transactions were part of a gentlemen’s agreement that satisfied their shared interest in art and supplemented Huang’s income from teaching and writing.

A letter to Huang Jusu, thought to date from 1942, provides insight into Huang Binhong’s attitude to selling paintings. Huang comments that even though he has a price list, set by a friend more than ten years earlier, he is not willing to sell paintings for a living. “Old price list attached, there is no new one”, he adds in a postscript suggesting that he has sent it to Huang Jusu as a reference guide. Huang Binhong wished to maintain a scholarly distance from purely commercial transactions and distinguished himself from professional artists who painted for a living. Money is a frequent topic of discussion, however, in the artist’s many letters to Huang Jusu and his other friends and patrons. It is clear that the gentlemanly transactions were central to Huang Binhong’s livelihood at that time. “With regard to your generous remuneration [hui run 惠潤], for the time being please give it to [my son] Yongming” Huang Binhong writes to Huang Jusu … . “I will paint the album first. The horizontal work has already been sent”.

Huang sent a large number of paintings to Huang Jusu and to Wu Ming and Liu Zuochou and they repaid him with funds that, with the inflation of the war years and the period immediately thereafter, still did not suffice. In letter written to Bao Junbai (鮑君白, 1905-1951), a friend from Shexian, in 1946, Huang confided:

The cost of living gets higher every day, so much so that things are many times more expensive than they were. I am far away and impoverished. While I have benefited from the deep friendship of family and friends, it is still a case of “looking at the plum blossom to quench one’s thirst” … . Friends from Guangdong request the most

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6 Huang Binhong, letter to Huang Jusu, dated 21 March [1942], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, pp.239-240.
7 For details of Huang Binhong’s known price lists, which date from 1909, 1923, 1924, 1931 and 1945, see Wang Zhongxiu, Mao Ziliang, Chen Hui, eds., Jianxiandai jinshi shuhua jia runlie (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2004), pp.87, 127, 147, 269, 326.
8 At the time Huang Binhong’s eldest son Huang Yongming lived in Hong Kong and worked as the head of the printing department at the Commercial Press. See Huang Binhong, letter to Huang Jusu, undated, Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.232.
9 Bao Junbai was from Yansi in Shexian. In 1927 he began to study painting with Huang and in 1933 graduated from the Shanghai Art College. During the Japanese occupation he helped Huang Binhong sell paintings to support his family. Bao lived in Shanghai until he became ill and in 1948 returned to live in Shexian. Bao Yilai, letter to the author, 13 July 2004.
paintings, but what I get from them is not enough to feed a family of eight. They are sincere, but it is risible, and my friends are tired and running all over the place, with letters going backwards and forwards. It is exhausting and expensive and I do not know how to repay their kindness.\footnote{Huang Binhong, letter to Bao Junbai, 21 May [1946], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.356.}

Huang Binhong also supplemented the income he received from teaching positions by selling historic works of art from his personal collection.\footnote{Huang Binhong, letter to Fu Lei, Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.217.}

**Huang Jusu**

Huang Binhong’s relationship with Huang Jusu was of particular significance. Huang Jusu admired Huang’s art and was determined to collect his work and at the same time offer financial support. In a letter that probably dates from the early 1940s Jusu offered to help Huang Binhong financially by selling his own collection of antique paintings. In exchange he hoped that Huang Binhong would create for him an archival record of the best of his artistic practice, representing different formats, artistic styles and subject matter. Having passed the age of seventy, Huang was in his artistic prime, according to Chinese belief, and Jusu realised that his paintings would only get better.\footnote{Huang Jusu, letter to Huang Binhong, undated, 9 pages (ZPM 4024).} Huang Jusu’s collection—the largest and most important collection of Huang Binhong paintings with an established provenance outside mainland China—shows that he did indeed collect the late paintings in a systematic and comprehensive manner.\footnote{Huang Jusu’s collection, which after his death was maintained by his daughter Huang Changling and her husband, the late Qian Xuewen in Hong Kong, is said to number some 600 paintings. It includes Wu Ming’s collection of 300 to 400 Huang Binhong paintings, which was acquired by Qian after Wu’s death.} Huang Jusu commented in one letter that he has only received a handscroll and an album that year and that if there is time he would like Huang Binhong to paint him two hanging scrolls, “one complex brush stroke and one simplified … then this year I would have a complete set”.\footnote{Huang Jusu, letter to Huang Binhong, 29 December, no year, 5 pages (ZPM 4025).}

Huang Jusu’s wish to create a comprehensive collection of Huang Binhong’s late paintings would have appealed to the artist’s own interest in securing his posthumous reputation. As he grew older Huang Binhong’s gaze settled not only on the past of Chinese art,
but also on the future of his own name. Jusu’s support made the artist even more conscious that he was contributing to a collection against which he would be judged in years to come.

A handscroll, painted for Huang Jusu in 1940, begins with the inscription “So dry the autumn wind will crack, but moisture also contains spring rain” (Gan ke lie qiu feng, run yi han qunyu). (Figure 7.2) The painting, executed in scorched ink (jiao mo), features an empty pavilion and a solitary figure seated gazing from his studio into barren wintry surrounds. The scratchy brushwork, which alludes to the work of the Xin’an artist Cheng Sui, powerfully evokes the dryness of the northern winter landscape. To complete the painting Huang Binhong has added a layer of pale ink wash to convey atmospheric moisture that heralds spring rain. The areas of wash solidify and unify the work, making the passages of void that lead the viewer through the painting more distinct. Through an insistent use of scorched black ink the artist has eliminated graded ink tones, which are generally conveyed through textural strokes, thus creating a highly simplified, powerfully expressive painting. The subject, focussed on dryness and moisture, is also interesting. “Run” 潤, which means moisture, can also mean payment or fee. The dryness of the atmosphere, characteristic of the northern Chinese climate that he sought for health reasons, was also perhaps symbolic of his financial and spiritual situation. The allusive depiction of winter and spring, dryness and moisture, welcomes Jusu’s remuneration and, with it, the renewal to come.

Another long handscroll completed for Huang Jusu in the spring of 1941, but begun years earlier, was inspired by a painting by the Yuan master Huang Gongwang that Huang Binhong saw in Sichuan in 1932-1933. (Figure 7.3) The inscription explains:

In a Sichuan collection there is a long handscroll by Huang Gongwang. While on holiday I looked at it for more than ten days, copied [lin] its basic idea and placed it in my travelling trunk. Since then I have applied dots and washes at various times and after many years it is complete.

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15 See Chu, ed., Homage to Tradition, plate 21, p.187, Yuanshantang collection, Hong Kong. For a related handscroll painted for Weng Renqiu, who was a friend of Huang Jusu’s and also one of Huang Binhong’s patrons at this time, see “Songlai Pavilion” in Chu, ed., Homage to Tradition, plate 23. After the end of the Pacific War Weng Renqiu was Mayor of Shantou in Guangdong. For other paintings dedicated to “Renqiu”, see Chu, ed., Homage to Tradition, plate 22, handscroll, ink and colour dated 1940; plate 27 handscroll, pale ink and colours, dated early summer 1941; and plate 28, handscroll, ink and colour, dated 1941.

16 Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art.
The process, starting with an ink sketch and drawing on memory, exemplifies Huang Binhong’s creative use of the past. Painted in soft tones of wet ink, with subtle washes of pale colour, the painting is not like the paintings discussed above. Despite its long gestation and the intense study that began it, the resulting painting is fluent and of the moment, showing how fresh and vivid the experience of the Huang Gongwang handscroll still was in his mind.

In early 1940 Huang Binhong painted many handscrolls for friends in Hong Kong. The handscroll was favoured by literati artists for its ancient format and its intimate, personal scale. In its gradual revealing of the image, looking at a handscroll is akin to reading. R.H. van Gulik observed that “In Chinese daily life handscrolls and albums occupy the same place as rare books and manuscripts. Literati and art lovers keep them on their shelves or carefully locked away; they are taken out only when one wishes to look at them.” Perhaps Huang’s preference for this format at this time was also in response to requests from patrons, or a consequence of his steadily deteriorating eye sight which prompted painting on a smaller scale. From a creative point of view the long, narrow format also offered different compositional challenges from the more familiar hanging scroll. For Huang Binhong it was a better vehicle to convey the scenery of southern China with which he identified so strongly.

The spontaneity and simplicity that is characteristic of many of Huang Binhong’s later calligraphic paintings is present in two ink hanging scrolls that date from 1942. The paintings show an admirable balance of wet and dry ink in a variety of tones and an ability to convey light through a conscious resolution of solid and void. They may be described as simplified brushstroke paintings (jianbi hua 簡筆畫) of the kind Huang painted more frequently as he got older. The first painting depicts a group of wintry trees in a rather barren landscape and is inscribed “A feeling of sparseness, desolation and remote tranquility, which can occasionally transcend brush and ink”. (Figure 7.4) In the other painting Huang tells us that he seeks to emulate the brush work of Li Liufang. (Figure 7.5) Huang Binhong admired the highly poetic

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17 See Huang Binhong xiansheng hua ji (Hong Kong, 1961), plates 43-44, 46-47 for handscrolls dated 1939-1940 that were originally in Hong Kong collections.
18 R.H. van Gulik, Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur, p.8.
and simplified brush paintings of the late Ming and early Qing Xin’an artists Li Liufang and Wang Zhirui 汪之瑞, his models in these and other stylistically similar works.\(^9\)

**Solo exhibition in Shanghai**

The most significant exhibition that Huang Binhong participated in during his years in Beiping was the solo show organised by friends to mark his eightieth birthday.

The Huang Binhong Calligraphy and Painting Exhibition (*Huang Binhong shuhua zhan* 黃賓虹書畫展) was held at the Ningbo Hometown Association Hall (*Ningbo tongxianghui* 寧波同鄉會) in Shanghai, 19-23 November 1943. Huang Binhong’s first solo exhibition was held in his absence.

The initial plan, as conceived by Cai Shou, Chen Zhu and Duan Shi (段栻之無染, 1914-1969) was to gather together paintings by Huang in the possession of close friends, and mount an exhibition to honour his eightieth birthday.\(^20\) At the time Cai Shou was living in Guangdong and Chen Zhu and Duan Shi were in Nanjing. Owing to a sudden change in Chen Zhu’s fortunes, and Duan Shi’s departure for Jiangxi, the organisation of the exhibition fell to others.\(^21\) Those who stepped in to realise the display were Fu Lei (傅雷, 1908-1966), a well-known translator of French literature, art critic and admirer of Huang Binhong’s work, Binhong’s student Gu Fei (顧飛, b. 1907), who was Fu Lei’s cousin, and Gu Fei’s husband, Qiu Zhuchang (裘柱常, 1906-1990), who later became one of Huang’s biographers. The exhibition featured some 160 works created over a ten-year period, including landscapes, bird

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\(^{19}\) For Huang Binhong’s comments on simplified brush work and Xin’an artists, see Huang Binhong, letter to Duan Shi, undated but thought to be from early 1940s, *Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian* p.93.

\(^20\) For two related paintings, see Chu, ed., *Homage to Tradition*, plates 31, 32, ink on paper, both dated 1942. Wang Zhirui 之之 Wurui, active during the early Qing dynasty, was from Xiuning. See *Huang Binhong wenji, shuhua shang*, pp.325-326.

\(^21\) Duan Shi was from Xiaoxian in Anhui. He graduated in Western painting from the Shanghai Art College (*Shanghai meizhuan*) in 1933. In 1938 he travelled to Beijing and studied with Huang Binhong. See *Huang Binhong nianpu*, p. 410. Duan wrote the article “A Record of Studying Painting at the Honglu Studio” (*Honglu xue hua ji*) and painted in a style that was similar to Huang. He died during the Cultural Revolution.

See Huang Binhong, letter to Qiu Zhuchang and Gu Fei in which he says he heard that Fu had purchased a painting(s) by Huang Binhong at *Rongbaozhai* which Duan Shi had entrusted to sell just before his departure. See Wang Zhongxiu, *Huang Binhong nianpu*, p.446. Chen Zhu was Principal of the Academy of Literature at the Central University in Nanking during the Japanese Occupation (*Riwei Zhongyang da xue wenxu yuan, yuanzhang*) and was persecuted at the end of the Pacific War. *Huang Binhong shuxin ji* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), p.214, and Wang Zhongxiu, letter to the author, 19 February 2004.
and flower paintings and calligraphy, all of which were for sale. There were also thirty-nine works from private collections including Deng Shi’s Fengyulou (風雨樓) collection and Gao Xie’s Chuiwanlou (吹萬樓) collections which were not for sale.\(^{22}\)

A photograph of the exhibition which Fu Lei sent to Huang Binhong shows a large room in the Ningbo Hometown Association Hall with internal partitions, a dense hang of vertical scrolls, and a row of tables on which albums are displayed.\(^{23}\) (Figure 7.6) The hanging scrolls were backed with a layer of paper (tuo 托) and fixed with small strips of paper to temporary scrolls made from brown paper. This method of display saved the expense of mounting and also took account of Huang Binhong’s aversion to mounting paintings, which arose from a genuine fear that it accelerated the process of deterioration.\(^{24}\)

Two publications accompanied the exhibition, an *Album of Landscape Paintings by Huang Binhong* (*Huang Binhong xiansheng shanshui huace* 黃賓虹先生山水畫冊) and a *Catalogue of the Exhibition of Calligraphy and Paintings of Huang Binhong* (*Huang Binhong shuhuazhan tekan* 黃賓虹書畫展特刊).\(^{25}\) The album reproduced twenty of Huang Binhong’s paintings selected by Fu Lei, with a foreword by Qin Gengnian 秦更年, and was funded by his friends Wang Yuan (王遠zie Qiumei 秋湄) and Wu Zaihe (吳載和zie Zhongjiong 仲坰).

The catalogue featured an autobiographical essay (*Zi xu自敘*) and a reflection by Huang Binhong on reaching the age of eighty (*Bashi gan yan八十感言*), and congratulatory essays and poems by close friends including Chen Shutong, Deng Shi, Qin Gengnian, Wang Qiumei, Gao Xie, Fu Lei and Gu Fei.

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\(^{22}\) Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 19 November 1943, *Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang* (Hefei: Anhuiwenyi chubanshe, 1998), p.77. See also Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 25 June 1943, which says that Fu Lei and Gu Fei’s collection of Huang’s works numbered twenty to thirty works, in *Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang*, p.55.

\(^{23}\) The people in the photograph seen viewing the exhibition include Fu Lei, his wife Zhu Meifu, Gu Fei and Qiu Zhuchang.

\(^{24}\) Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 20 September 1943, *Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang*, p.63.

\(^{25}\) The album was published by the Jianzhen Society (*Jianzhen she*) in Shanghai in November 1943. The catalogue was edited and printed by the Preparatory Office of the Huang Binhong Calligraphy and Painting Exhibition (*Huang Binhong shuhua zhanlan hui choubei chu*).
In the autobiographical essay Huang Binhong discusses his life in Beiping, emphasising once again his selectiveness in parting with his paintings.

I have lived hidden away in Beiping for close to ten years and have declined many invitations in order that I might fight to gain supremacy over the silverfish for my piles of papers. I do not pass a day without looking at my books, rubbings of inscriptions on stone or bronze, calligraphy and paintings. Many people demand to see my paintings, and I show them my daily exercises in recording my travels, of which there are more than ten thousand sheets. They are all rough outlines on coarse paper, without textural strokes or washes. Those who see them cannot help but marvel at my industry, but at the same time they chuckle sneeringly at their old-fashioned nature. As soon as I begin to give them a brief introduction they flee. There are others who come and demand paintings. For years now I have not acquiesced. There have been instances when a collector with works by famous artists has looked closely at my work and I have asked to see works from their collection before I have given them a painting. And there are those who write from distant places seeking works, who I am selective about without regret.26

Of particular interest is Fu Lei’s catalogue essay “Responding to Questions Posed by Viewers of the Paintings” (Guan hua da ke wen 觀畫答客問), written as a dialogue based on frequently asked questions that highlight the difficulties people had appreciating Huang Binhong’s free brushwork and bold artistic conception. The essay began with the question “Huang Binhong is a landscape painter. Why is it that his mountains do not look like mountains and the trees do not look like trees? The brush strokes are chaotic and do not coalesce into forms”. Other questions were “What is brush and ink,” “But what about the chaotic brushwork, which is like scattered firewood or tangled hemp. Is that the brush and ink you speak of,” and “Mr Huang’s paintings are very carelessly painted and stylistically very different from most contemporary painting. Is it that one must first be careless and only then look for the brush and ink?” People were also curious about the connection between historical works of art and those by Huang. “Mr Huang derives inspiration from paintings of the Song and Yuan dynasties. How is this manifest in his paintings?” Fu Lei’s responses are as carefully considered as the questions he poses and reveal both a keen appreciation of Huang Binhong’s paintings and an awareness of

26 Huang Binhong, “Zi xu,” in Huang Binhong shuhua zhanlan hui tekan, 1943, p.4.
the their reception at that time. In the essay Fu Lei demonstrates his ability as an art critic and his skill at explaining Huang’s art to the public. From this point on he became a champion of Huang’s art.

**Fu Lei**

Huang Binhong and Fu Lei met eight years earlier in the Shanghai home of Liu Haisu, when Liu, Fu and Huang were teachers at the Shanghai Art College. Fu Lei had studied in France from 1928 to 1931, acquiring the linguistic skills that made him one of the finest translators of French literature into Chinese.\(^{27}\) (Figure 7.7) In 1930 Fu Lei published an essay on Cézanne and a few years later, with Liu Haisu, edited *Masterpieces of World Art (Shijie ming hua ji 世界名畫集)*, a series of art books that introduced the modern European masters Cézanne, Derain, Van Gogh, Renoir, Matisse and Monet to a Chinese audience. His years in Paris had given Fu Lei an unusually keen understanding of French culture and Western thought in general.\(^{28}\) But he was also interested in ancient Chinese history, art and philosophy. In a letter to Huang in Beiping, dated May 1943, he vividly recalls the artist’s sketches of Mount Emei in Sichuan that were displayed at the Shanghai Art College:

> Recently I have spent quite a lot of time at the home of my relative Gu Fei, where I heard about your lofty views on art. It won my heart. Not only in China are ancient laws looked to for renewal. It is also worth examining recent Western artistic principles, for they do not differ markedly. What one regrets is that of so many people, so few really understand this and even fewer are able to implement it.\(^{29}\)

The letters between Huang Binhong and Fu Lei reveal an intense intellectual dialogue. Despite the difference in their background and age, their friendship was based on a profound meeting of

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\(^{27}\) Fu Lei taught art history and French and Huang was a tutor in the Painting Research Institute at the Shanghai Art College. See Shen Hu, ed., *Liu Haisu sanwen* (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1999), p.275. In 1932 Fu Lei and Ni Yide edited *Yishu xun kan* published by the Shanghai Art College and in 1935 he was invited by Teng Gu to travel to Nanjing to be the section chief of the copy editing department of the Central Committee for the Protection of Antiquities (*Zhongyang guwu baoguan weiyuanhui*). Using the pen name Fu Rulin he edited and translated the *Compilation of Judgements Relating to the Protection of Antiquities in Various Countries (Geguo wenwu baoguan faguan hudian)* which was published by the committee in June of that year. In 1936, he was invited by Teng Gu to travel to Luoyang as a member of the Central Committee for the Protection of Antiquities to report on the Buddhist caves at Longmen (*Longmen shiku*) and to research preservation matters. See *Fu Lei yi wen ji* (Hefei: Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 1989), vol.15, pp.539-544. Fu Lei and Huang Binhong met in Shanghai but it was only after Huang moved to Beiping that Fu Lei saw Huang’s paintings, was deeply impressed by them, and began regular correspondence.

\(^{28}\) Fou Ts’ong, conversation with the author, London, 30 September 2002.

\(^{29}\) Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong dated 25 May 1943, *Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang*, p.50.
minds. In their letters, written between 1943 and Huang Binhong’s death in March 1955, they discuss art history, painting techniques, and many present-day issues. Huang Binhong’s correspondence with Fu Lei gave him particular pleasure. He was curious to learn more about Western interest in Chinese art and identify points of confluence between eastern and western artistic practice. Each was attracted to the intellectual world of the other and stimulated by their exchanges.

In the letters leading up to Huang’s solo exhibition there is much discussion of the catalogues and the presentation and pricing of the artworks. The paintings were sent to Fu Lei in batches. One letter acknowledges receipt of twenty works. Another letter mentions that thirty paintings were sent to Shanghai by the Japanese organisation Shinmin-kai (Xin min hui 新民會). And Huang Binhong reveals some of his concerns and anxieties to Fu Lei:

My biggest doubt is that my paintings are not in line with what most people of today expect to see as art and at a time of world economic depression [the exhibition] might be an extravagant waste of time. It is difficult for a large number of people to like [my work].

In a postscript, Huang Binhong goes further:

Of all the people in the art world, there are very few who are engaged in a study of the classics. It is even harder to find people who can explain theory, and there are even fewer who are willing to listen. In my humble opinion, I think things have gone too far. We have arrived at this point in only twenty years. Most people reply that painting has survived well. But they do not understand. If one only seeks people to understand, and not grasp theory, then not only will they be unable to appreciate ancient paintings, the whole art world will go into a steady decline. It really is regrettable. I have never given my paintings away lightly. When you give away calligraphy or painting there is a chance that your paintings will be used as packing paper as happened during Xinluo’s [Hua Yan 1678 - ca. 1765] lifetime. My paintings are daily exercises [rike 日課]. I do not strive for completion and do not date or sign them. Those that are finished are the ones which people have requested and are taken away by family members. The paintings for this exhibition have been painted over the last ten years. Most are personal.

30 Ibid., p.52.
31 In an attachment to that letter, which accounts for all of the paintings in the exhibition, there are two lots that are listed as having been sealed by Xinminhui. Others were sent by the Art Academy (Yizhuan) where Huang worked. See Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 18 October 1943, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang, pp.69, 71.
32 Huang Binhong, letter to Fu Lei, 20 October [1943], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.206.
exercises in painting. Yuan artists used many layers of ink. Because their works are dark and heavy they are not to contemporary tastes. People prefer the attractive appearance of paintings by the Four Wangs. Calendar posters are also very popular. The pine and the cypress are evergreen and do not compete with the many other plants, and do nothing but protect their own purity. People want me to paint particular kinds of works, but I can only offer apologies and paint as I see fit.\textsuperscript{33} In this letter Huang highlights just how out of step with the times he felt. He alludes to the darkness of his own largely monochrome paintings, which he compares to those of Yuan artists, who were also painting during a time of foreign occupation. He felt a great personal responsibility to continue the tradition of which he was part. His despondency at the inability of his paintings to compete with popular and commercial works of art and brightly coloured, mass-produced calendar posters (\textit{yuefenpai} 月份牌) can be linked with his concern at both the state of Chinese brush and ink painting and the contemporary political situation.\textsuperscript{34}

Yet despite Huang’s doubts about the reception of his paintings, the exhibition was a success, visited over a period of five days by some 600 people.\textsuperscript{35} All except seventeen works were sold, some to Victoria Contag.\textsuperscript{36}

A number of extant paintings bear the seal “Guiwei year [1943] at the age of eighty” (\textit{Guiwei nian bashi} 癸未年八十) and can therefore be dated to 1943.\textsuperscript{37} Eighty is a rare and venerable age, the most significant birthday, and a mark of incredible fortune and blessing, hence the carving of the seals used on works in Huang Binhong’s solo exhibition.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., pp.207-08.
\textsuperscript{34} For a discussion of Chinese calendar posters, see Zhang Yanfeng, \textit{Lao yuefenpai guanggao hua} (Taipei: Hansheng zazhi, 1993).
\textsuperscript{35} Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 24 November 1943, in Wang Zhongxiu, \textit{Huang Binhong nianpu}, p.456.
\textsuperscript{36} The exhibition raised about 120,000 [yuan] after costs. See Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, dated 24 November 1943, \textit{Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang}, p.81. Fu Lei put a hold on 10 paintings for himself, and 10 for his friends and family. Later, he mentions a total of 19. See \textit{Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang}, pp.70, 75. At the end of the first night 97 works were reserved, which amounted to 60,300 yuan. Fu Lei, letters to Huang Binhong, 19 November, 21 November 1943, \textit{Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang}, pp.77-80.
\textsuperscript{37} Other examples of paintings with the seal \textit{Guiwei nian bashi}, of which there are two different seals, include a painting of roses and bamboo, inspired by the Yuan dynasty artist Wang Yuan (active 1328-1347), now in the collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. (S1987.246).
\textsuperscript{38} Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 1 October [1943], \textit{Fu Lei shuxin ji}, pp.47-48.
One painting inscribed “winter 1943” depicts a solitary fisherman and an empty thatched hut on a nearby riverbank. An elevated wooden footbridge in the distance leads the eye to a mountain range at the top of the painting and to the colophon. Huang Binhong makes use of predominantly pale, silvery-grey, wet ink and delicate colour. A striking pale green wash alludes to spring, recalling the lush landscape region south of the Yangtze River. Bold areas of indigo blue (huaqing 花 青) and red ochre (zheshi 赭 石) wash overlap with one another and with areas of pale ink adding to the subtle colour harmonies. Many of the ink dots (dian 點) that enliven the texture of the painting are made with old ink (su mo 宿 墨) and thus are surrounded by a “halo” of paler ink which seems to radiate outwards. Such dots are typical of the consciously energized marks that constitute Huang Binhong’s mature style. The painting is a homage to the Song artist Mi Youren (米 友 仁, 1086-1165), the son of Mi Fu (米 輿, 1051-1107) and evokes the lively image of a writhing dragon. The inscription reads:

Like a young dragon with a face full of whiskers emerging from the sandy edges of the bend in the river
Green waves streaked with black support an ancient raft,
Year after year washing over the stones,
Laughing I look at the alchemist in Mi’s poem.

Inspired by a poem by Mi Youtang

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39 This painting is in a private collection in Berlin and was acquired by Jerg Haas, a German student who spent a number of years in southern China and Hangzhou during the Cultural Revolution. After his return to Germany the collection, which also included works by the late the Qing artists Ren Bonian, Ren Xun and Pu Hua, as well as Qi Baishi, Wang Zhen, Xu Beihong, Tang Yun and Zhang Daqian, was exhibited at the Kunstdam Wedding in East Berlin in 1974. [Chinesische Malerei der Gegenwart, Kunstdam Wedding, Berlin, 3 September to 7 October 1974]. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) and China established diplomatic relations in October 1949. During the 1960s the political relationship with the GDR suffered as relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated. Cultural co-operation between the two countries ceased in 1966 and after 1967 there was no official co-operation. See Fan Honghui, ed., Zhongguo duiwai wenhua jiaoliu gailan (1949-1991) (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 1993), pp.214-215. Haas was involved in the 1968 student demonstrations and is said to have written to Zhou Enlai asking to visit China at the time of the Cultural Revolution. (Private collector, conversation with the author, Berlin, 10 October 2002). During the Cultural Revolution, traditional style painting, regarded as part of the “Four Olds,” was considered ideologically problematic. Many works of art were destroyed or forcibly removed from private collections. Many of the paintings illustrated in the catalogue are dedicated to particular individuals, which suggests they were given up by their owners or forcibly removed from them during the Cultural Revolution. For example “Buddhist monk” by Wang Zhen (dated 1932 and presented to the Buddhist organisation Fojiao jingye she);“Galloping horse” by Xu Beihong (dated 1946, dedicated to a Mr Wancheng);“Self portrait” by Zhang Daqian (dated 1936, dedicated to Mr Wan’an); and “Landscape” by Zheng Wuchang (dated 1945, dedicated to Mr Shaotang). The Haas paintings are among many nineteenth and early twentieth-century Chinese artworks that found their way into Western collections as a result of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.
A companion painting to the Haas work, dated winter 1943, is inscribed with a poem by Mi Youtang and also bears the seal Guiwei nian bashi.\(^{40}\) (Figure 7.9)

I took the fish, bought some wine and started off to the east of the wooden bridge,  
The surf broke through the reeds and the wind whipped flowers and waves.  
The village by the river is drowning day and night in the deep autumn colours.  
The fishing boat has returned and is tied up in the glow of the sunset.  
Painted on the theme of a small view of the autumnal riverbank taken from the poem by Mi Youtang.\(^{41}\)

The painting depicts a covered fishing boat moored at an inlet close to a cluster of houses.  
Huang’s use of ink and bold areas of coloured wash creates the impression of the verdant undergrowth so typical of southern Chinese landscape.

The painting is impressed with a seal that reads “The bamboo that has moved northwards” (Zhu bei yi 竹北移). It appears on many paintings made when Huang lived in Beiping.\(^{42}\) Bamboo, ubiquitous in southern China, was a favoured subject of literati artists. Its evergreen appearance is symbolic of constancy and steadfastness, which was very much self-descriptive for Huang’s Beiping years. Huang Binhong had a bamboo plant in the courtyard of his house, a constant reminder of southern China and Shexian in particular. Like the poems of Mi Youtang that create an atmosphere of leisurely reclusion, bamboo qualities accorded with Huang’s attitude towards his time in Beiping.

Another painting that also bears the 1943 seal recalls Huang Binhong’s travels in Qingcheng mountain, Sichuan.\(^{43}\) (Figure 7.10)

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\(^{40}\) Collection of the National Gallery of the Czech Republic in Prague (Vm 679). The painting was purchased in China in 1955.  
\(^{41}\) Translated in Masters of Shanghai School of Painting, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery in Prague, August-October 1968, cat.8, p.19, and illustrated in Josef Hejzlar, Chinese Watercolours (London: Galley Press, 1987), plate 58.  
\(^{43}\) Collection of the National Gallery of the Czech Republic in Prague (Vm 678). This painting was acquired in China in 1955. In 1954 the Czech art historians and curators Lubor Hájek, A. Hoffmeister and E. Rychterová travelled to China and attest to the strong cultural links between Eastern bloc countries and China during the early Communist period. It is likely that a number of the paintings by Huang in the collection of the National Gallery, Prague were collected by the delegation. In 1968 there were more than twenty paintings by Huang Binhong in public and private collections in Czechoslovakia, and over 300 works by Qi Baishi. According to the Czech art historian Josef Hejzlar, many were collected by the Czech artist Professor V. Chytíl, who was a personal friend of Qi Baishi, and as early as the 1920s introduced Shanghai School paintings to European audiences. Hejzlar also collected paintings by Huang Binhong. In the 1968 catalogue Masters of Shanghai School of Painting, plates 10-12 are credited as being from the collections of J. Hejzlar and Li Tai Chün-Hejzlarová. See Hejzlar, “About the Shanghai School of Painting,” Masters of Shanghai School of Painting, p.14, and L. Hájek, A Hoffmeister and E. Rychterová,
I discovered a fairy cliff to the west of the hilltop where the dragons live.  
I went down a zig-zag path, the water was crystal clear and the stones mysterious.  
My heart quivered and my eyes shone with joy.  
A reminiscence of wanderings in Qingcheng. 

In stylistic terms this painting differs strikingly from the previous work. The clear, calligraphic lines that structure the work have been overpainted with successive layers of short brush strokes and veils of ink and pale colour wash that give the painting an abstract or impressionistic quality. This lyrical work conjures up in painterly terms the mystery and wonder of discovery that Huang Binhong alludes to in the inscription.

A stylistically similar painting bearing the seal “Binhong after the age of eighty” (Binhong bashi yihou 賓虹八十以後) suggests that it too was painted soon after 1943. 

(Figure 7.11) The bone-like structure of the painting has been laid down with ink lines, over which Huang has applied layers of irregularly shaped ink dots and daubs. Superimposed over these dark ink markings are larger impressionistic dots of saturated, mid-grey ink and washes of intense mineral green, blue and ochre that convey movement and atmospheric effects. The deep indigo colour has solidified and sits on the surface of the painting as solid particles, creating a textured and extremely painterly effect. The landscape is viewed from a high vantage-point. The layering of ink line, dots, wash and colour creates a shimmering effect which brilliantly suggests the haze through which distant features of the landscape are viewed. The painting, inspired by Huang’s travels in Sichuan, is inscribed:

The view from the boat entering the Qu River having travelled from Guang’an’s Heavenly Lake [Tianchi] and the Luohan River [Luohan xi].

At the lower margin of the painting a solitary figure in a boat emerges from a small waterway and travels in the direction of a large expanse of water, the Qu River 渠江. The painting is light and open, dominated by large areas of void. Huang Binhong’s confident brush and ink technique and his bold, innovative use of colour capture the exhilaration of arrival. The deeply

Contemporary Chinese Painting (London: Spring Books, 1961), the book jacket of which proclaims that the authors recently returned from China. I would like to thank Michaela Pejcochova, curator of Chinese art, for her kind assistance in examining the archives at the National Gallery in Prague.

44 Translated in Masters of Shanghai School of Painting, p.20. The painting is not illustrated. See also Josef Hejzlar, Chinese Watercolours (London: Galley Press,1987), cat.9 for an illustration.

45 Collection of the National Art Museum of China (00698). On the outside of the scroll there is the stamp of the Chinese Artists’ Association (Zhongguo meishujia xiehui).
reductive artistic vocabulary expresses the atmospheric quality of the Sichuan landscape with powerful intensity.

Such reductiveness caused Fu Lei to compare Huang’s paintings with Impressionist landscapes. Fu Lei encouraged Huang Binhong to see Chinese painting, including his own works, in a broad, international context. In a letter written in May 1943, Fu Lei observed:

When you talk of the brush work of Dong Yuan and Juran, in my humble opinion, I think you can use that to your advantage to explain your own technique. At the same time it has some similarities with the appearance of Western Impressionist painting of late last century. (The word Impressionism was a derogatory phrase used by the academicians, but which later was commonly adopted.) The Impressionists analysed the effect that light had on changes in colour and came to understand the principle of the intermixing of light and shade and so abandoned fixed methods of shading (much as our artists paint rocks by making the upper area pale and the lower area dark) and concentrated on depicting shade within light and light within shade. At the same time they began to use the original paint colours rather than mixing the colour first. The brushwork also tended to be freely painted, chaotic and yet with principle. When you look up close you can barely make out anything material and it is only when you stand back that the imagery begins to become apparent in all its light, colour and magnificence, metamorphosing and floating to its zenith. In so many ways this is similar to the school of Dong Beiyuan [Dong Yuan] and to your own purpose and intention. It is like the wonder of arriving at an identical point but via a different course.46

An album of eight landscape paintings dated 1943 that belonged to Fu Lei could have prompted the above letter. The paintings record Huang Binhong’s impressions of travelling in Sichuan. The inscription on one of the leaves reads:

From Suining we enter the Jialing River catchment area
The mountains are clear and the water is beautiful
refreshing to the heart and pleasing to the eye
Whoever comes here can forget their troubles.

The abstracted brushwork and delicate veils of overlapping blue and deep red wash create a jewel-like surface that sparkles with energy and movement. (Figure 7.12) Huang Binhong allows the watery wash to run and find its own form, creating the impression of heavy

46 Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 9 June 1943, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang, p.52.
atmosphere, mist and cloud. In some leaves he appears to have deliberately applied water or coloured wash to still wet areas of the painting for an even more fluid and impressionistic surface effect. The juxtaposition of ink, ink wash, colour and colour wash is masterly, fully justifying Fu Lei’s comparison with the Impressionists.

A landscape painting dated 1947 (but which predates that year) suggests that Huang Binhong took an active artistic interest in Fu Lei’s idea of points of confluence between Chinese and western art and the “wonder of arriving at an identical point via a different course”. (Figure 7.13) It depicts a conventional southern Chinese scene of low-lying mountains bisected by a waterway, with a cluster of dwellings that hugs the banks of the river. The house closest to the viewer is open to the elements and reveals a scholar seated in his study, listening to the nearby stream. An attendant enters the room and brings the man some tea in a classic image of a scholar engaged in self-cultivation, communing with nature, far removed from the concerns of the urban world.

The painting is drawn in pale and mid-grey ink with some darker textural strokes to convey depth. Through the addition of layers of pale grey ink wash, sometimes tinged with colour, Huang Binhong conveys the misty atmosphere of Jiangnan during the cooler months of the year. The treatment of the water is particularly interesting. The artist has dragged a broad brush loaded with pale ink across the paper to create the effect of “flying white,” although with a feeling of moisture rather than dryness. This textural effect, applied at the point where the water meets the river-bank, creates an impression of both the solidity of water and the shimmering, reflective quality of its surface. In most of Huang Binhong’s landscape paintings lakes or rivers are rendered as expanses of void. Sometimes he adds a few calligraphic brush strokes to the water’s edge, a traditional device for linking water with land. The most common way to create an impression of solidity was to add a boat or two to a lake or river represented by a void. The use of broad brush strokes to convey the reflective surface of the water as here is an approach found in Western art and suggests an experimental interest in light and form. The painting is inscribed:

47 The painting is recorded as having the title “Garden of Infusing Tea” (Zhu ming yuan). It was recently auctioned. See Zhongguo jinxiandai shuhua, Zhongguo Jiade paimai hui (China Guardian auctions), Beijing, 8 November 2004, cat.1641.
In the past I obtained some very fine paper and used it to paint. I placed it in a full chest [of my paintings] And without being aware of it many years have passed

Huang Binhong appreciated the special effects of brushwork, ink and colour that could be achieved with fine old paper and a practised brush, especially to depict water and light.48

In an essay on the future of Chinese painting published in the *North China New Newspaper* in 1944, Huang expressed the idea of a commonality between Eastern and Western art in terms that echoed the discussion with Fu Lei:

Western painting approaches abstraction from impressionism, using dots or short strokes to create form and line. At its highest point of expression it approximates Eastern art and is very similar. But if we approach painting from photography, then it is overly rational, deriving much from Western civilisation. If art is approached through poetry and literature, with an emphasis on brush and ink, then it gains from spiritual civilisation. It is like the difference between science and philosophy … 49

**Post-exhibition paintings**

After Huang Binhong’s solo exhibition, many people approached Fu Lei wanting to acquire works. “Many friends have asked me to seek additional paintings from you,” Fu Lei wrote to Huang,

but because you do not advertise a price list I am not willing to accept their requests. Some people wanted painted fan leafs, but I replied that I thought that would be unlikely. I am not sure whether or not you could acquiesce with some simple brush and ink works? Others sought entire albums, but I did not know how they would be priced (for example what would you charge for 8 leaf, 10 leaf, and 12 leaf albums). I am disappointed not to be able to meet people’s requests. But to take on people’s requests arbitrarily is not honest. I look forward to your detailed response and will then be happy

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48 A similar painterly effect that also suggests an experimental approach and an interest in Western artistic solutions may be found in some of Huang Binhong’s flower paintings. In selected works Huang Binhong adds parallel strokes of pale ink or pale wash to the area of void behind a flower, which has the effect of highlighting the motif and thrusting it forward. The technique is frequently found in Western painting to render three dimensions. See paintings in the collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (ZPM 24168, 24174).

to follow your instructions. Most of those seeking paintings reserved works at the exhibition, and are sincere people who regard you with admiration.\textsuperscript{50}

Huang replied:

I am very willing to paint works for people who you introduce as a means of disseminating my works. Paintings with complex or simple brushwork, small or large, can all be accommodated.\textsuperscript{51}

With Huang Binhong in Beiping Fu Lei became the artist’s \textit{de facto} agent in Shanghai. Fu Lei wrote regularly to Huang detailing requests for paintings, sometimes with suggestions of what particular people wanted by way of format, size or technique.\textsuperscript{52} Huang Binhong sent artworks to Fu Lei through the mail and Fu Lei’s replies often begin by acknowledging receipt of, for example an “album of twelve leaves,” “two fans” or “five paintings”. Fu Lei’s son Fou Ts’ong (Fu Cong) remembers the thick letters that would arrive from Huang Binhong in Beiping.\textsuperscript{53} Fu Lei also helped with the business side of things, was closely involved in managing aspects of Huang Binhong’s financial affairs, including helping to sell historic paintings from Huang’s personal collection when the need arose.\textsuperscript{54}

Fu Lei had contact with many Westerners in Shanghai. He suggested that Huang paint some small works of art as gifts for appreciative Westerners who might promote an awareness of his art overseas. Huang reciprocated by sending paintings to Fu Lei to be passed on to his friends and acquaintances.\textsuperscript{55} Fu Lei had contact with a wide network of people and Huang

\textsuperscript{50} Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 2 December 1943, \textit{Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang}, pp.84-85.

\textsuperscript{51} See Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 13 January 1944. Fu Lei quotes these words from Huang’s letter to him, dated 4 December 1943, which is not included in the \textit{Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian}. See \textit{Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang}, p.92.

\textsuperscript{52} Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 17 December 1945, \textit{Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang}, p.113.

\textsuperscript{53} Fou Ts’ong, conversation with the author, London, 30 September 2002.

\textsuperscript{54} For example Fu Lei, letters to Huang Binhong, 2 December 1943, 29 December 1943, and 15 January 1944, \textit{Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang}, pp.84-85, 90-91, 93. See also documents in the collection of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum relating to the accounting of artworks sent to Shanghai for the exhibition (ZPM01037), and detailed acquittals after the conclusion of the exhibition (ZPM 01036; 01037; 00964). See also an undated statement of Huang Binhong’s income in Fu Lei’s handwriting relating to the sale of historical artworks, including paintings by Ni Yunlin and Dong Qichang and monies passed by hand to Huang by Wu [Zaihe] and Mr Cao. The sale of the Ni Yunlin landscape realised a profit of 560 yuan (bought for 140, sold for 700) whereas one of the landscapes by Dong Qichang was sold for the purchase price (ZPM 04757). Wu Zaihe, a keen seal carver, who worked at the Jinshang Bank assisted Huang to manage his financial affairs. See Huang Binhong, letters to Wu Zaihe, \textit{Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian}, pp.63, 65-66.

\textsuperscript{55} Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 29 December 1943, \textit{Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang}, p.91. A group of small paintings that are in a private collection in the Czech Republic are perhaps representative of this type of work. See Josef Hejzlar, \textit{Chinese Watercolours} (Gallery Press, London, 1987), plates 62, 64, 66. See also, Fu Lei, letters to Huang Binhong, dated 1945, 25 October 1945, and 8 March 1946, \textit{Fu Lei...
Binhong was interested in promoting an awareness of his work and finding people who appreciated his paintings, no matter who they were or where they lived.

**The influence of Northern Song painting**

Many inscriptions on Huang Binhong’s late works refer to landscape painting of the Northern Song (960-1126), a period of extraordinary achievement in art that, in the words of Richard M. Barnhart, “became the foundation for all later dynasties.” Northen Song emperors took a great interest in the arts and Song Huizong was himself an accomplished artist. The court became the center of a flourishing artistic community and many art historical writings were compiled. Huang Binhong was interested in the landscape painting of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms artists Jing Hao (ca. 855-915), Li Cheng (919-967), Guan Tong (early tenth century) and Song dynasty artists Fan Kuan (active ca. 1023-1031), Guo Xi (1023-1085), Li Tang (ca. 1050-after 1130), Su Shi (1037-1101) and Mi Fu (1051-1107). “Of the many earlier works that I have,” he wrote to Fu Lei in 1945,

many use techniques that derive from the Northern Song. They are very dark with complex layers of brush strokes.

In most cases there is little formal resemblance between Huang’s paintings and the work of the artists to whom he refers. What interested him was their creation of a monumental landscape painting style, reflecting the towering mountains of northern and western China, and the moral-spiritual dimension of Northern Song artworks that seemed even more remarkable after the conquest of the Tartar Jin 金 in 1127 and the Mongol occupation of 1279. As Huang Binhong observed, “After the Song dynasty the focus of painting moved to the south and artists concentrated on painting the landscape south of the lower Yangtze River Valley. Most paintings were of low-lying, close up mountains with views to other mountains in the distance [ping yuan jing 平原景]. There were no large hills and ravines.”

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wenji, shuxin juan, shang, pp.108-110, 112, 117, and Huang Binhong, letter to Fu Lei, 29 May [1945] and 16 November [1945], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, pp.212, 220.
57 Huang Binhong, letter to Fu Lei, 16 November [1945], *Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian*, p.220.
Huang Binhong was inspired by the monumentality of mountains and their association with ideas of majesty, mystery and profundity. Through his observation of nature he was drawn to the idea of depicting mountains at night (夜山) and looked to the dark, layered and monumental paintings of Northern Song artists for inspiration.

Huang’s references to Northern Song painting are often coupled with imagery of mountains in Sichuan. In a colophon on an undated painting, Huang makes this connection clear:

Northern Song artists painted many images of the Sichuan [Bashu] landscape, majestic, strange and of infinite variety. This is a painting of a scene along a small path at Qingcheng Mountain.59

In another painting of Sichuan, this time of Longmen Gorge 龍門峽, Mount Emei, Huang Binhong describes the mountain as “steep and precipitous” adding “I did this painting with the conception of paintings of the Northern Song”. (Figure 7.14) The work depicts a man with a staff crossing a bridge over a deep gully and waterfall. The figure is small and alone as he makes the journey across the bridge, from one side of the landscape to the other, echoing the sentiment of the seal affixed to the lower right of the painting: “Going off on a long journey all by myself, I am both carefree and self-contented”. The brushwork is lively and painterly with a range of ink tones and textures, and vivid green and warm apricot-pink wash. The painting, relatively small in scale, is imbued with a palpable energy that draws the viewer into the composition and the all-encompassing world that the artist has created by fusing his experience of travel and of historical paintings.60

In 1947 Huang Binhong wrote to Fu Lei about the influence of Northern Song paintings on his creative practice:

Recently, I have sorted paintings from my daily course of study going back many years. In more than half I have not completed the entire painting. In coming north, I sought to find paintings from the Tang and Song dynasties. Artists of the Northern Song mostly

59 Huang Binhong wenji tiba bian, p.44.
paint the dark side of the mountain [yin mianshan 陰面山, also meaning the north side of a mountain] using heavy ink. It is as if you are walking in a cave or through a narrow ravine at the foot of a hill at night. The layers are moist with ink. It is necessary to apply many successive layers of dots and washes and so it takes time for a painting to be completed. Whilst it cannot be avoided that the paintings become saturated, heavy and muddy, I seek void after applying the solid areas. It is also the path I must traverse in the practice of painting.  

Huang regarded his paintings as works-in-progress and would add to them, sometimes years after they were begun. Many paintings from the late period in particular bear even later inscriptions making it difficult to place them in terms of Huang’s stylistic evolution.

An interesting work inspired by paintings of night mountains by Northern Song artists was inscribed by Huang Binhong in 1946, although it predates that year as indicated by the phrase chongti (重題 later inscribed) that appears after Huang’s signature. (Figure 7.15) The inscription reads:

Northern Song artists created paintings of mountains at night, which is the technique of painting the dark side of a mountain. Of the four famous artists of the Yuan, only Ni [Yunlin] and Huang [Gongwang] used simplified brush stokes. But the most simplified of simple strokes all come from extremely complex brush strokes. Dachi [Huang Gongwang] studied [Dong] Beiyuan, and [Ni] Yunlin studied Jing [Hao] and Guan [Tong], so they comprehended the principles of [the relationship between] complex and simplified brush strokes. This is something I have paid great attention to. In this work I synthesise the ideas of Song and Yuan painting.

Towering mountains, dense with trees and lush foliage, dwarf a temple complex that nestles at the foot of the mountain. In front of the temple there is a small stream that emanates from a place high in the mountain. There are no figures. A predominantly dry brush and scorched ink have been used to build a scratchy textured substructure over which the dots and layers of wash are superimposed. Despite the darkness of the painting, the layers can be clearly discerned. The brush strokes are abbreviated and feathery, without Huang’s usual calligraphic lyricism. Passages of void, approximate waterways and areas of mist create breathing pockets within the painting that relieve any feeling of oppression or claustrophobia.

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61 Huang Binhong, letter to Fu Lei [1947], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.224.
Huang Binhong was intrigued by nightscapes and while travelling at night took great delight in experiencing different tones of blackness. He produced many black and brooding paintings during the Beiping years, expressing both his own mood and the national psyche at the time. The works, with their frequent reference to the Northern Song, or night mountains, are deeply introspective. The artist’s fascination with painting “the dark side of the mountain” continues the tradition of withdrawal or retirement (yinyi 隱逸) and the art of the scholar-recluse (yinshi 隱士) within the context of bitter and uncertain times.\(^\text{62}\)

In a related undated work the dark mountain virtually fills the entire pictorial field.\(^\text{63}\) (Figure 7.16) The painting is signed “Old Man Hong” (Hong sou 虹叟), an appellation that Huang used in Beiping and Hangzhou, and that suggests a late 1940s date. Strong calligraphic lines combine with layer upon layer of abbreviated, short strokes and dots, and ink and colour wash, to create the dark and solid-looking mountain form. The only sign of human habitation is an indistinct stone bridge near the centre of the painting that has almost disappeared into the landscape. Only the passages of misty void relieve the encroaching darkness.

The painting is inscribed:

The untrammelled brushwork of Ni [Zan] and Huang [Gongwang] largely derives from their study of Jing [Hao] and Guan [Tong] and their transformation of complex [brushwork] to abbreviated [brushwork]. Northern Song [artists] often painted the dark side of mountains, the valleys of which were so dark it was as if you were travelling at night. By building up depth and substance through layer upon layer [of brush strokes] one can alter the wooden quality of Tang painting. The aim is to seek spiritual accord, not verisimilitude.

In this and the previous inscription, Huang suggests that what he is painting represents a synthesis of his experience of walking in the mountains at night and his study of paintings from the Northern Song period. Huang had written to Fu Lei that in Sichuan he had produced “close to one thousand pages, mostly sketches made while travelling, in outline form, without textural strokes, which come close to the abbreviated brush works of Ni [Zan] and Huang

\(^{62}\) Other works from this period with Northern Song references include *Huang Binhong jingpin ji*, plate 36 (1947); Chu, ed., *Homage to Tradition*, plate 46 (1948); *Huang Binhong huaji*, 1995, plates 92, 94 (1948); *Yishudazhan: Huang Binhong*, plate 17 (1948).

\(^{63}\) Collection of the Shanghai Museum (SM 54951).
In depicting mountains at night Huang emphasised his interest in darkness and his desire to create landscape paintings that were built on the simplified brushwork of the Yuan masters Ni Zan and Huang Gongwang, which in turn derived from the earlier masters of monumental landscape painting, Jing Hao and Guan Tong. He sought to create landscape paintings that were substantial and imbued with a profound emotive power.

Once again, the climatic variations that Huang had experienced while travelling through the landscape of Sichuan proved to be an enduring inspiration:

Song and Yuan paintings have in the main been created through the painstaking accumulation of layers of ink over time, resulting in works that bring together the disparate strokes in a substantial form and at the same time are lustrous and moist and are not insubstantial or weak. Travelling through Sichuan, I journeyed from Guan County through Yulei Pass to Mount Qingcheng and drew everything I saw, from morning to night, trees and mountains constantly receding and reappearing through the mist and rain. I accumulating many sketches. After returning I seized the moment and painted very freely, the brush took up the ink required for its satisfaction and what was produced was in accord with nature.

In an essay relating to Daoism and art written while living in Beiping, Huang made a direct link between painting and the socio-political environment, citing Laozi 老子:

In their discourses on painting the ancients say that it is important to read ten thousand books. In my opinion artists could do worse than to start with Laozi. If we begin with the Daodejing, its objectives are relevant to art. The Laozi is a book about governance, and it follows that painting is not merely an activity of the recluse. When Confucius 道德經 [551-479 BCE] travelled to the Kingdom of Zhou, Laozi said to him that gentlemen living in times of harmony excel, whereas those who do not must inevitably tread a difficult path. The Jin, Wei and Six dynasties were periods of decline but produced the ancient artists Gu [Kaizhi], Lu [Tanwei 陸探徵, active 460s to early 6th century], Zhang [Sengyou 張僧繇, active 500-550], and Zhan [Ziqian 展子虔, mid to late 6th century]. The Five dynasties was chaotic but produced Jing [Hao], Guan [Tong], Dong [Yuan] and Ju [Ran]. During the Yuan there was Huang [Gongwang], Wu [Zhen], Ni [Zan] and Wang [Meng] and during the late Ming the monks Jianjiang, Shixi and Shitao. All of them lived in dangerous and chaotic times and placed their hope in painting. It is therefore possible to rescue society from danger and ruin through art and

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64 Huang Binhong, letter to Fu Lei, undated, Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.218.
65 This is part of a long inscription on a painting dated 1948. Huang Binhong wenji, tiba bian, p.55.
to bring prosperity to future generations. The ideals of these artists may be compared to
the actions of Laozi. No one is able to vilify them.\footnote{From the essay “Landscape Painting and the \textit{Daodejing}” (\textit{Shanshui hua yu Daodejing}) in \textit{Huang Binhong wenji, shuhua bian, xia}, p.394.}

Huang saw himself as part of this lineage of artists. He acknowledged the chaos of his own
times and understood that his art would and should be read in relation to it.

One of the central concepts associated with Daoism is \textit{ziran} 自然, which refers to
nature and may be understood as naturalness, or that which is spontaneous and happens by
and of itself. It is distinct from the western concept of nature which denotes “the material world, or
its collective objects and phenomena, especially those with which man is mostly directly in
contact; frequently the features and products of the earth itself, as contrasted with those of
human civilization”.\footnote{Oxford English Dictionary definition.} For Huang Binhong, however, apprehending the natural, or \textit{ziran},
involved developing a profound awareness of the landscape through both personal experience
and historical and literary comprehension. “When travelling through the landscape you must
first study historical records” he argues,

and interpret scattered texts that have been neglected, as well as poems, prose and songs
that people have assembled relating to every hill and gully that you traverse. Only then
will you be able to taste the beauty of the scene and capture its form in a manner that
can be appreciated and will endure. Otherwise the landscape and the picture will lack
spiritual liveliness and even though you travelled there the impression will appear
forced and lacking in spontaneity. It will not be distinguished. In reading historical
books one must hold the landscape in the mind and heart in order to apprehend the
marvellousness of its pattern.\footnote{Huang Binhong \textit{wenji, shuhua bian, xia}, p.395.}

The artist’s relationship to nature was complex, subtle, shifting and at times contradictory, as
Yi-Fu Tuan has observed: “Artists and scholar officials appear to be torn by opposite values,
desiring … both knowledge that comes from direct contact with nature and knowledge that
is aligned with the idea of the \textit{Dao} 道 or Way, as expounded in discussion of the \textit{Daodejing}.

Throughout his life he was fascinated by the generative power of nature, its life-force, freshness,
originality. Regarding the value of nature, the philosopher Joseph Grange says: “In its originality life expresses an exceptional spontaneity. Freshness is the mood and tone of all living things …. The Chinese call this TAO”. He goes on to say “the intensity of life springs from its character of originality. Life is always to some degree marked by zest”. 70 Huang Binhong was also inspired by the mystical-magical attributes of nature. In Yi-fu Tuan’s formulation, the landscape was “a world of natural and supernatural forces and spirits, a world designed to assuage the human longing for immortality”. 71 

In an unpublished essay entitled “On butterflies” (Shuo die 說蝶) inspired by the Daoist classic Zhuangzi, Huang recounts the well-known story of Zhuangzi who dreamt that he was a butterfly, but on waking did not know whether he had dreamed he was a butterfly or was a butterfly dreaming it was Zhuangzi. 72 Huang used the life cycle of a butterfly as a metaphor for learning to paint. He said:

A butterfly develops from a caterpillar to a chrysalis and matures into a butterfly in three stages. Those who study painting must first learn from recent artists, then continue to learn from ancient artists and finally learn from nature, which is also three stages. 73 “Discussing the Daodejing is just like discussing art,” he maintained. 74 Only by following the Dao and engaging in disciplined study could the final stage in a natural progression of artistic transformation could be achieved.

Simplified brush painting

Fu Lei was introduced to Michael Sullivan (b. 1916) by their mutual friend Pang Xunqin (龐勳琴, 1906-85) whom Sullivan had met in the mid-1940s when he was studying

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71 Yi-Fu Tuan, Passing Strange and Wonderful, p.215.
72 Huang Binhong,“Shuo die,” in Huang Binhong wenji, shuhua bian, xia, pp.425-426.
73 Ibid.
74 Huang Binhong wenji, shuhua bian, xia, p.395.
archaeology in Sichuan and teaching at the West China University Museum in Chengdu. Fu Lei wrote to Huang Binhong that the young British scholar was writing what he described a “comparative art history”. After Sullivan left China in early 1946, Fu Lei took the initiative of sending Sullivan a copy of Huang Binhong’s 1943 exhibition catalogue and approached Huang about sending one or two album leaves as reference, suggesting that original artworks would reproduce better than photographs.

After his return to England, all of Sullivan’s research notes were lost. In response Pang Xunqin sent a circular letter to Chinese artists early in 1947, requesting them to send reproductions of their works, a biographical statement and copies of any of their writings to him for forwarding to Sullivan. (Figure 7.17) In the circular Pang said:

My English friend M. Sullivan plans to systematically introduce Chinese artists and the twentieth century Chinese art movement to Europe.

It was around this time that Fu Lei raised the matter of Sullivan with Huang once again in two letters, one of which said that the British Council representative [Geoffrey Hedley] had seen some of Huang Binhong’s paintings at the Hanzhai art gallery and was keen to photograph them and send them to Sullivan as reference material for his book on the history of contemporary Chinese painting.

Geoffrey Hedley (?-1960) worked in China from 1944 to 1950 and assisted Chinese artists in Chongqing, Beiping, Nanjing and Shanghai. From 1947 to 1949, he was one of two

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75 Pang Xunqin and Fu Lei met in Paris. Pang studied in Paris from 1925 to 1930 and Fu Lei from 1928 to 1931. In a letter Pang wrote to Sullivan, he advised that correspondence could be sent to him care of Fu Lei. Michael Sullivan, conversation with the author, Oxford, 11 June 2003.
77 Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 14 April 1946, *Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang*, pp.118-119.
79 Collection of Michael Sullivan.
80 Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 13 April, 14 November 1947, *Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang*, pp.123-124.
Regional Directors of the British Council in China and for much of the period was based in Shanghai.  

Sullivan recalls:

Geoffrey Hedley, moving between Nanjing, Beijing and Shanghai, was not only helping the struggling artists, but, with enormous difficulty, obtaining photographs for the book I hoped to write.

There was a less than overwhelming response to Pang Xunqin’s circular letter, but Sullivan did receive an original painting from Huang Binhong in the mail. The small ink and colour landscape reached London in 1948, or early 1949. (Figure 7.18) Recalling Huang’s travels in Sichuan, it was likely intended to have a special resonance for Sullivan who spent a number of years in Sichuan during the war. The painting is inscribed “Waiting to cross the river in the shade of the pine trees. A scene observed during my travels in Sichuan. Binhong”. It depicts two men seated on the bank of a river in conversation, waiting for a punt to cross from the other side. Beyond the figures is a wooded mountain and a cluster of houses. The structure of the painting is executed in dry black ink. Layers of dots and textural strokes have been added in wet and dry, dark and paler ink to give depth and substance to the painting. The marks have been abstracted and despite the apparent randomness with which they have been made, coalesce into a coherent Chinese landscape painting. Watery layers of green, orange and blue wash of varying degrees of intensity add to the complex fabric of the painting. Huang uses old colour (su se 宿 色): particles suspended in the wash are left on the surface of the painting, adding an interesting textural dimension. By sending an original painting, however modest, directly to Sullivan, Huang signalled his keen interest in promoting a greater understanding of Chinese painting in Europe and his desire to be considered for inclusion in Sullivan’s book.

Huang wrote to Bao Junbai, probably in 1948:

In Shanghai, Hedley [Xi Teli 希特 立], a friend who works for the British Council, is looking for and buying contemporary artworks, but is not interested in those which copy the style of works from the Tang, Song, Yuan and Ming. He is seeking works that have

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82 Ibid., pp.4-15 and cat.53, p.88.
brush and ink that is both hoary and yet moist and will take them to London to assist his friend Sullivan in the writing of a book on the history of Chinese painting.  

Sullivan’s book *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century* was finally published in London in 1959 and reproduced three paintings by Huang, though the painting Huang sent to Sullivan was not among them. Sullivan and the publishers chose a 1952 painting from the collection of Chen Jingzhao (陳景昭, 1907-1972) as the frontispiece, a dark landscape painting dated 1948 dedicated to Zheng Junhua (鄭俊華, and a smaller undated painting from the collection of Fu Lei. In the acknowledgements, Sullivan thanked Hedley for his help.

A photograph taken by Wu Zuoren in 1948 shows Hedley in Beiping with Qi Baishi, Xu Beihong and the woodcut artist Li Hua (李華, 1907-1994). (Figure 7.19) Perhaps Huang met Hedley around that time too.

Hedley’s close involvement with Chinese artists is reflected in an album of paintings that appears to have been prepared close to his departure from China. The title page of the album was written by Pu Xinyu (1896-1964) and the album includes a painting each by Fu Shuda (傅叔達, ?-1960), Pu Xinyu, Lin Fengmian (林風眠, 1900-1991), Zhang Yuguang (張聿光, 1884-1968), Fu Baoshi (傅抱石, 1904-1965), Qi Baishi (齊白石, 1863-1957), Ding Xiongquan (丁雄泉) Walasse Ding, b. 1929) and two paintings by Huang Binhong.

The paintings by Huang are bold and in some ways uncharacteristic. The first sketches a mountain corner with a steep view down on to waterside pavilions, sailboats and a distant

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83 Huang Binhong, letter to Bao Junbai, [1948], *Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian*, p.368.
84 In a rather prophetic letter to a friend, written long before the book was published, Huang stated with some pride that three of his paintings would be included. See Huang Binhong, letter to Zeng Xiangting, 23 May [no year], *Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian*, p.199.
85 Hong Zaixin, “Shaojie Shaojie xiren xueshu Hongyang dangdai guohua: guanyu Huang Binhong wannian he Su Liwen de yiduan jianjie duihua,” paper presented at an international symposium on Huang Binhong and his legacy held by Fine Arts Research Institute of Chinese Academy of Arts and Zhejiang Museum on 27 August 2004, p.10. Chen Jingzhao was a former student of Huang’s who lived in Macau. His collection, *Baihong lou*, was recently auctioned in Beijing, including many letters and paintings by Huang. See *Zhongguo jinxianshi shuhua*, vol.1, Jiade pemai hui [China Guardian auctions], Beijing, 16 May 2004, lots 793-95, 799-802, 806-817.
86 Sullivan thanked Hedley “for the great trouble he took in securing photographs and information for me after I left China. In a period when conditions were growing daily more chaotic, he found time to seek out artists, borrow their paintings and take them to be photographed in the Lister Institute, Shanghai, and in addition collected valuable biographical data, often with great difficulty”. Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), pp.9-10.
88 The dated paintings in the album span the years 1949-1951. Huang Binhong’s paintings are undated and have been pasted into the album, which suggests that he may have painted the works after he left Beiping.
landmass. (Figure 7.20) The vantage-point is dramatic and the brush strokes are particularly uninhibited. Huang has outlined the forms in thick, dark, wet ink and applied a more than usually chaotic tangle of textural strokes. Added vibrancy comes from the use of blue and deep red pigment and applied colour wash. The second sketch, by comparison, is more open and abstract. (Figure 7.21) The “bones” of the landscape are outlined in dark black ink straight lines that are virtually unknown in freehand landscape painting. A minimal number of ink dots, and discrete areas of deep red and pale ink wash give definition to the mountain. One area of brilliant blue wash appears deliberately to defy the squared profile of the mountain peak, breaking free with a feeling of painterly exhilaration. The straight lines and built forms that meld with the landscape are reminiscent of the straight roads and viaducts which cut through and structure Cézanne’s mountain paintings. Cézanne’s watercolours of La Montagne Sainte-Victoire, a subject he painted throughout his life, are notable for their linear pencil substructure and the overlay of dancing brush strokes of transparent colour that appears to emanate a pure, brilliant light. (Figures 7.22, 7.23) These later watercolours characterized by John Rewald as “thin, large superimposed washes out of whose cohesion the image emerged,” come closest to the painting by Huang Binhong.89 The two paintings made for Hedley suggest more eloquently than any of his other works that Huang Binhong knew French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art. In this painting for Hedley he seems to consciously allude to that knowledge and demonstrate his familiarity with modern art, highlighting the similarities that he believed existed between Chinese and Western painting. He emphasizes the abbreviated style of painting and calligraphic linework that derived from Northern Song and Yuan painting that, as he and Fu Lei noted in their letters, was appreciated by Westerners. Nor do the paintings have calligraphic inscriptions, which would have been unintelligible to a Western viewer. Both paintings bear a single seal, placed strategically in the sky as if to double as an image of the sun or moon. In these small, distinctive sketches Huang reveals his sophisticated engagement with the possibilities of artistic dialogue from one culture to another.

As we have noted, Fu Lei had observed similarities between Huang Binhong’s paintings and Impressionist art, commenting on Huang’s innovative use of colour. He praised the way Huang based his painting techniques on traditional principles but also signalled a new path for national painting [guohua]. His informed comment encouraged Huang to continue to experiment with brush and ink in this fashion. Of one album, “The Many Islands of Kowloon” (Jiulong zhu dao 九龍諸島), painted when Huang Binhong was seventy Fu Lei comments:

Apart from the broad strokes that outline the painting there are virtually no textural strokes. Brush work cannot get any more simplified than this. Your use of colour is expansive and concentrated. [The paintings are] unique with an appearance completely unlike anything that has come before. They summon a new pathway for Chinese and foreign art. I would very much like to receive a few similar small albums to remember you by.

“The Many Islands of Kowloon” album painted in 1933 appears to be stylistically similar to a group of paintings of Hong Kong and Kowloon that Huang Binhong painted in 1949, at the age of eighty-six. (Figure 7.24) Fu Lei admired Huang’s painting style, which featured bold outlines, few textural strokes and broad areas of colour. In a later letter, Fu Lei returns to Huang Binhong’s use of colour:

With regard to your marvellous use of ink, after the two Mi’s and Fangshan [二米房山 Mi Fu, Mi Youren, Gao Kegong] how can you give way to Zhonggui! [仲圭Wu Zhen] The application of colour has not heretofore been regarded with respect. I think that it is a way forward.

In many landscape paintings Huang Binhong used colour with confidence and sensitivity, working with traditional mineral and vegetable colours, but mixing his own tones and hues, sometimes adding ink or mixing two colours together on the brush to create elegant and unusual effects. In some works as colour became increasingly integral aspect of the painting he painted with colour as he would with ink. Huang Binhong was, in fact, a brilliant colourist, especially in his later works.

90 Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 9 June 1943, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang, p.52.
91 Fu Lei, letters to Huang Binhong, 9 June 1943 and 4 January 1946, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang, pp.52, 114.
92 Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, dated 8 March 1946, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang, p.117.
93 Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, dated 20 August 1946, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang, pp.120-21.
An exquisite small album painted in 1948 and dedicated to Fu Lei, now in the collection of the Shanghai Museum, is a fine example of Huang’s sensitivity to colour. It was most likely painted during or soon after the visit of Fu Lei and his wife to Beijing in May 1948.**4** (Figure 7.25) Incisive dry ink lines and dots, together with veils of impressionistic tincture, give expression to the fantastic mountain forms of Yangshuo. The Hedley paintings are crude by comparison. The paintings for Fu Lei reveal Huang’s great concentration and easy control of his medium for all his eighty-five years. But nowhere is Huang’s interest in colour, that Fu Lei so appreciated, better demonstrated than in the paintings of flowers. A good example is an album of insects and flower paintings on pale pink paper flecked with gold leaf dated 1948.**5** (Figures 7.26) Huang combines the traditional ‘boneless’ painting technique (*mo gu hua* 没骨畫) with freehand brush painting or sketch conceptualism (*xieyi hua* 寫意畫). A close look reveals how ink and colour work together to create the motif of a dragonfly hovering over a lotus pond, or the flitting movement of butterflies, evoking the beauty of life, the seasons, and all that is transient.

During their meetings and in correspondence Fu Lei and Huang Binhong canvassed many issues, and Huang confided his difficulty in sharing his ideas on art. (Figures 7.27) Huang was aware of points of similarity between Chinese and Western art. He considered his work to be deeply informed by traditional Chinese art, but not constrained by it, as he explained to his friend:

The ancients derived their brushwork from practice over the course of their lives, painting without ceasing. In a letter last year you talked of my brushwork as leading the way for a simplified painting style. I very much agree. But in the past when I discussed this with artist friends in Shanghai they all laughed at me and said it was impractical or reacted as though it were a joke. As a result, I have not dared talk openly with people about art theory. But with your dedicated determination to research the principles of Chinese and foreign art, you can take the opportunity of this period of quiet to do the

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**4** For reference to this trip see Wang Zhongxiu, *Huang Binhong nianpu*, p.493.
**5** Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. See Wen C. Fong, *Between Two Cultures: Late-Nineteenth and Twentieth-century Chinese Paintings from the Robert H. Ellsworth Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp.178-179. According to Robert Ellsworth, this album was among a group of works he acquired in late 1981 or early 1982 that was said to have come directly from members of Huang Binhong’s family. Robert Ellsworth, conversation with the author, New York, 21 May 2003.
utmost to become familiar with the many areas of similarity between Chinese painting and the West. People share the same heart/mind and it follows that with the same heart/mind come the same principles. What is different is the materials.96

Elsewhere commending dialogue between Chinese and Western scholars, Huang highlighted brush method as a point of commonality that might offer opportunities for mutual understanding:

Today many people in China and overseas are keen to promote dialogue between Chinese and Western scholarship. Change in painting method must start with brushwork.97

And to Huang Jusu, he writes:

Over the last five or six years, I have put aside many tens of my finest paintings so that in the future I may re-experience the joy of travel by looking at them in repose. Owing to the gradual process of aging my eyesight has already deteriorated. I can only do paintings using simplified brushwork. I hope they can still be appreciated. Recently Europeans and Americans really seem to like them, and they seem fairly clear and lucid in terms of their research into Chinese painting techniques. I often get news from overseas that people are particularly interested in the art of Shitao, Shixi, Jianjiang [Hongren] and Zha Erzhan [Zha Shibiao]. All of these artists have emerged from and transformed the traditions of the Song and Yuan, they are not ordinary people.98

Huang Binhong’s failing eyesight became a problem in the late 1930s, restricting his ability to read and paint, although he continued to do so. In 1939 he had written to Huang Jusu:

With my left eye I can only see things that are about a foot in front of me, but I continue to produce the calligraphy and paintings that are requested. According to the doctor I must wait until it [the cataract] is fully mature before the obstruction can be removed. As a result, everything is blurred.99

In a letter to Duan Shi, thought to have been written in 1942, he talked in greater detail about his condition:

Western doctors require an operation, but the cataract is not yet ready for this procedure. Each morning there is only a short time when my eyes are clear and I am

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96 Huang Binhong, letter to Fu Lei, undated, Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.215.
97 Huang Binhong, letter to Fu Lei, undated, Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.219.
98 Huang Binhong, letter to Huang Jusu, Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.233. This letter appears in the 1940 section of Wang Zhongxiu, Huang Binhong nianpu, p.425.
99 Huang Binhong, letter to Huang Jusu [1939], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, pp.232-233.
lucid and can paint. After the sun comes up my vision becomes blurred, and it is like being in fog. My Guangdong friends continue to request paintings, but I turn most of them down.\textsuperscript{100}

Huang’s continuing frustration is expressed in a letter to Bao Junbai in 1946:

My eyes get worse by the day and I can only paint for one or two hours in the morning; even then it is difficult for me to control the brush strokes.\textsuperscript{101}

In late 1943 or early 1944, when he first became aware of Huang Binhong’s eye condition, Fu Lei counselled against painting. But Huang Binhong’s determination to go on, coupled, it would seem, with the need to supplement his income, ensured that his daily painting practice continued.

In a 1946 letter Fu Lei makes a gentle critique of some recent paintings, suggesting the cataract condition may be to blame.

Occasionally there are areas that are too solid, or where the layers have lost some definition which I presume is caused by the obstruction to your sight, or indicates that perhaps you were working for too long without realising it.\textsuperscript{102}

Fu Lei’s comment echoes the more strident criticism by the critic Shi Chongpeng, mentioned previously:

This time he has a few landscape paintings attached to Qi [Bai] shi’s exhibition. They appear more than ever like a mass of black ink and totally without depth. I really don’t understand. Why does Mr Binhong paint in this manner? Looking at his inscriptions he claims a lineage to Beiyuan [Dong Yuan] and Siweng [Dong Qichang 董其昌, 1555-1636]. Could it be that Beiyuan and Siweng also painted works that look like a ball of black ink? Paintings from the Northern and Southern Song are very dark, dense and heavy, but you can always see the layers of ink very clearly. Mr Binhong splashes and smudges to the extent that you can no longer discern the layers of ink. (His brush work is in fact not substantial, it is dense but not substantial and lacks flavour!) It really is a bit odd! …\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{100} Huang Binhong, letter to Duan Shi, \textit{Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian}, p.91.
\textsuperscript{101} Huang Binhong, letter to Bao Junbai, 21 May [1946], \textit{Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian}, p.356.
\textsuperscript{102} Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 20 August 1946, \textit{Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang}, pp.120-121.

\textsuperscript{103} Shi Chongpeng, “Lue you xiaci de Huang Binhong,” \textit{Xiandai yishu lun} 1 (1947), p.16. I would like to thank Wang Zhongxiu for providing me with a copy of this article. The exclamation marks are in the original text.
Despite his deteriorating eyesight and old age, Huang Binhong made many paintings during the mid to late 1940s. The majority are simplified brush stroke paintings, employing lyrical, calligraphic brush strokes and short, abbreviated textural strokes and dots. His exploration of the fluid properties of ink and ink wash at this time may have been a response to his failing vision, but it also took him back to the heavy, humid environment of southern China where he felt at home. And as with previous periods of his life Huang continued to be inspired by art historical examples and his experience of natural phenomena, and painted simultaneously in a number of very different artistic styles.

In a painting dated 1946 Huang Binhong recalls his earlier journey to Mount Emei in Sichuan. (Figure 7.28) The painting has a dynamic composition created by the careful placement of motifs and highly energised and abbreviated directional brush strokes. The eye is led into the painting along a lower path and a circular flow of energy is created through the placement of a bridge, trees and two figures in conversation, which then extends upwards to the tall mountain peaks. The painting is inscribed:

The cinnabar and yellow colours of the autumnal woods delight and draw us to a place deep within the mountains where we are shrouded in clouds.
I recall the winding path leading up Mount Emei,
With a glass of wine in hand and bowing my head I compose a poem.

Huang gives the mountains dynamic form through long, calligraphic, pale-grey ink brush strokes that are punctuated by short, dark, dancing textural strokes. Layers of pale ink wash, tinged with mineral green, and orange-red, provide colour contrast and enhance the autumnal mood. The overall pale palette gives the painting a hazy, atmospheric quality, which is brought into sharp focus by Huang’s calculated and judicious use of colour, attracting the eye and leading the viewer through the painting. Here, as in many other paintings, Huang Binhong uses old colour in which particles separate and sit on the surface of the painting.

Another landscape painting, dated 1946 and dedicated to Huang Jusu, is executed in ink and is open, sketchy and calligraphic by comparison. (Figure 7.29) From a high vantage point we look down upon a riverside village. Huts hug the lower margin of the painting. Beyond, fingers of land push their way into the pictorial field, representing low mountains that extend,
layer upon layer, to the horizon. The painting is executed in various tones of wet and dry, light and dark ink. A final layer of scudding brush strokes using dry, jet-black ink, suggests wind in this animated but rather desolate space. Apart from a figure meditating in one of the huts, the only sign of life is a pair of sail boats in the distance. The painting is inscribed:

Living a life of retirement, in peace and quiet,
Surrounded by desolate land such that mist and waves are indistinguishable,
The woodlands and trees are about to loose their leaves and there are only a few thatched-roof houses.
No dust from the world can enter here
Living in a place like this is very difficult to achieve these days.

As with artists of the past, Huang uses the landscape to express his feelings of desolation at a time of uncertainty and growing unrest. After the surrender of Japan the previous year and the withdrawal of her troops, China was descending into renewed civil war: “I recently saw a letter published in the newspaper Da Gong Bao [L’Impartial] which reported on the political situation in northern China,” Fu Lei wrote early in 1946,

It seems as though it is as chaotic there as it is here. At present it seems as though people’s suffering is the same everywhere. It is even worse than it was during the enemy occupation period. Whilst peace has descended, the national crisis has not ended. What will happen now? What will happen now?  

By 1948 Huang was writing to Fu Lei about the huge increase in the cost of living and the need to sell some antique paintings from his personal collection in order to make ends meet. “While I can still protect and maintain my state of mind it is hard to predict what the future holds” he admits,

This makes me feel uneasy. Comrades and old friends are becoming fewer and fewer and the future of art is unknown. But language and the Chinese script cannot be abandoned in one day and national painting has for thousands of years been capable of renewal which is a consolation. But the epoch and the situation are different. One has to be flexible and discerning.

Poverty and starvation were widespread at this time. In March 1948 the Beiping Municipal government began to supply Huang Binhong with a monthly bag of flour. A local newspaper

104 Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 4 January 1946, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang, p.114.
105 Huang Binhong, letter to Fu Lei, undated, Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.217.
reported the gesture as a sign of respect for the elderly artist, who continued to read and paint for five to six hours a day. The donation was intended to counter the hyperinflation that made even basic commodities extremely expensive.\footnote{In a letter to Huang Shuzi 黃樹滋 Huang commented that it cost more than 100,000 [yuan] to send a registered letter to Zhejiang or Anhui and that even being frugal the family needed more than three million [yuan] per month to survive.\footnote{Huang Binhong, letter to Huang Shuzi, undated, \textit{Huang Binhong wenji shuxin bian}, p.283.} That same year Huang Binhong finally left Beiping for the south. He was eighty-five years old.\footnote{Huang Binhong departed Beiping for Shanghai 23 July 1948. In mid-September he moved to Hangzhou and lived in accommodation provided by the art academy at 19 Qixialing. See Wang Zhongxiu, \textit{Huang Binhong nianpu}, pp.494, 499-500.}

In the years leading up to his departure Huang Binhong had painted many works that took Shexian and Huangshan as their subject. Perhaps they are indicative of the old man’s growing desire to return to that familiar environment as with failing eyesight, he reflected on his life and the lives of family members, and his ancestral origins in Anhui.

In 1947, for example, he painted an image of the mountain cottage of his ancestor Huang Lü (\textit{Fengliu Shanren}), inspired by Huang Lü’s painting “Dwelling in the Mountains” (\textit{Shan ju tu 山居圖}). (Figure 7.30) The painting is large and freely drawn in ink and colour. At its centre is a group of buildings that constitute Huang Lü’s mountain retreat. Two men, one with a staff, stand in a courtyard in front of the house engaged in conversation. The figure to the left is slightly smaller and leans forward with hands in front of his chest in a gesture of respectful greeting to the other. These two figures represent Huang Lü and Huang Binhong, brought together for a conversation across time. There is a study and a pavilion from which to appreciate the landscape and listen to the bubbling stream. A large mountain with swirling mists and fast flowing waterfalls towers behind. Huang Binhong inscribed the painting with a poem that conflates past and present, fantasy and reality.

One of Huang Binhong’s most striking paintings of Huangshan dates from 1948. In this work he uses dark ink, intense mineral green pigment and large areas of void to create an impression of height, atmospheric energy and movement. Two figures in white robes are seated on a grassy knoll close to the top of Huangshan. (Figure 7.31) They face one another, engaged
in conversation against the backdrop of a windswept mountain-top with swaying pine trees, scudding clouds and tall peaks in the distance. Layers of broken brush strokes make for matted and unconventional areas of texture in which the function of individual strokes in defining form only becomes apparent with the application of the pale ink wash or veils of yellow-green wash that bind them together. Intense mineral green “old colour” wash makes the mountain-tops crystalline, illuminated by the brilliant yet icy-white light of the moon. The painting and poem evoke the haunting atmosphere of a nightscape where a state of physical transcendence is achieved even as the chill wind returns.

A few short, contorted pine trees, 
With a mountain towering above. 
You can feel the warm air in the atmosphere, 
But the cold winter wind returns. 
Clouds fill the gully, 
Rushing in like ten thousand stampeding horses. 
The mountain valleys appear to be immersed in water, 
Like waves of white snow the clouds glisten under the light of the moon.109

In the inscription on another ethereal landscape, painted in early spring of the same year, Huang Binhong notes that he had not visited Huangshan for ten years (Figure 7.32):

The clouds at Huangshan are like silver-coloured waves enveloping the mountain peaks, 
By chance I met an old friend, we had a drink and climbed to the top of Guangming Peak. 
Descending the mountain, the pathway was obscured by thick cloud and we could no longer see where our feet were planted.110

The trunks of the pine trees near the foot of Huangshan are cut by mist, and high above, a temple building is perched on the top of Guangming Peak. Huang Binhong has used a thick blunt brush to create a work that is similar in mood, but stylistically different from the previous painting. Executed in a pale palette, with a bold use of mineral green pigment, balanced by highlights of orange-red, it too has an other-worldly quality.

109 Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art (XB 97.002).
110 Collection of the National Art Museum of China (Guo 00691).
The Beiping years of 1937 to 1948 proved to be a period of intense artistic exploration and experimentation for Huang Binhong. Removed from the familiar environment of the south, he was able to draw freely on his recollections of travel and of paintings he had viewed in the former imperial collection, as well as his continuing dialogue with friends and mentors about diverse subjects including the future of Chinese painting and points of confluence between Chinese and Western art. Surrounded by his travel notebooks and copybooks and his library of references, his mind full of art historical facts and anecdotes, Huang Binhong painted diligently every day in these years synthesizing what he had seen, recorded, remembered and been inspired by. The works he created alluded to particular people and places but grew increasingly reductive, abstract and private.\(^{111}\)

Fu Lei understood that Huang Binhong’s art was profoundly informed by the history and practice of Chinese painting, but that it also resonated strongly with modern consciousness. He recognised that Huang Binhong’s art transcended cultural and geo-political boundaries and could engage with both Chinese and Western viewers. He shared Huang Binhong’s excitement about forging a path forward for Chinese brush and ink painting that made use of China’s cultural traditions, based on simplified brush work and bold, painterly use of colour but he was also despairing and uncertain about the future.\(^{112}\)

Through his friendship with Fu Lei, in particular, Huang Binhong found rare intellectual support for his artistic practice. Fu Lei’s relative youth and cosmopolitan background were in stark contrast to Huang Binhong’s old age and a life lived within China, pursuing traditional art, history and philosophy. That Huang Binhong embraced Fu Lei’s intelligent mediation and advocacy of his art points to a natural curiosity and openness in the artist as his interest in experimentation intensified with age. With late maturation as an artist, Huang Binhong discovered the artistic freedom that is born of intensely felt experience and the closest familiarity with his chosen medium.

\(^{111}\) See the inscription on a handscroll painted for Huang Jusu, depicting the landscape of Emeishan, dated autumn 1939, *Huang Binhong wenji, tiba bian*, p.66.

\(^{112}\) Fu Lei, letter to Huang Binhong, 4 January 1946, *Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang*, p.114.
As he journeyed south in July 1948, he may have thought of his painting of the Lian River, Shexian, in which a tiny figure crosses a bridge, an image of transition as he contemplated his own fate and that of the nation.\footnote{Collection of the National Art Museum of China (Guo 00586). This painting was inscribed by Huang Binhong in 1953 but was painted at an earlier date as indicated by the signature “Re-inscribed by Binhong” (Binhong chongti). For a painting of a similar subject, created in 1948 see \textit{Twentieth Century Chinese Paintings in Singapore Collections}, exhibition catalogue (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2003), pp.60-61.} (Figure 7.33)