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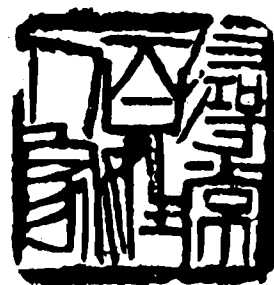
"Can rain or good weather be called forth? I have heard your cries, as if trying to induce rain or good weather. Can a spouse be expelled? You are the only male in the animal world that may be said to do just that."

When Ch'i Pai-shih was seventy-one he dictated to one of his pupils, Chang Tz'u-ch'i, an account of his life up to age 87 (1947). T.C. Lai has made an abridged translation of this narrative for his new book *Ch'i Pai Shih*, Hong Kong: Swindon Book Co. and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973. The first five chapters, devoted to the artist's early years, begin on the opposite page.

齊璜：白石老人自述
From Carpenter to Painter
—My Early Years

By Ch'i Pai-shih (1863-1957)

Translated by T. C. Lai



One of the commonfolk.

Chapter 1 Childhood

I WAS BORN in the year Kuei Hai, the "year of the pig", 1863. My grandfather and grandmother were still alive. We were extremely poor. Our house was small, rather out of repair, with a drying yard in front. Our worldly possession was just one *mou* of paddy field producing five or six stones of gram a year, but this was not enough to keep five people alive. My grandfather and my father both had to do odd jobs to eke out a living. Odd-job people in those days had their meals at their masters' homes and were paid twenty coins per day. Although this was a small sum, it was not easy to come by because one did not get such work every day. Many people wanted odd-jobs and employers were usually mean and difficult to get along with. Thus, these people had to make do with "fishing one day, drying the nets the next three", meaning working one day only to stay idle the next three. When there was nothing to do, my grandfather and my father would gather firewood up the hills and sell it. That was how we carried on.

My native village was Hsiang T'an, Hunan. According to my grandfather, our ancestors moved to Hsiang T'an from Tang Shan, Kiangsu, in the Ming Dynasty during the reign of Yung Lo. How

we got settled in Hsiang T'an I could not tell, but during the reign of Chien Lung, my great-great-grandfather moved to Hsing Tou T'ang or Star Pond in Hsing Tzu Wu (Apricot Valley) where I was born. It was so called because a meteorite fell in the pond in the remote past. It was a scenic spot. Ten miles from there lay the township of Yen Tun Ling. Our ancestral shrine was there where every year the Ch'i clansmen gathered to worship. I cannot remember all the things my grandfather told me about my great-great-grandfather except that they were all buried in Star Pond. My great-grandfather was the third son in the family and he was called San Yeh, "Master Number Three." My ancestors were all farmers and, in those days, farmers were poor people and they usually remained poor all their lives. My grandfather, being the tenth son in the family, was called Shih Yeh "Master Number Ten." He was a straightforward man and whenever he saw injustice, he would speak out in indignation, so everybody called him "the blunt one." He went through the ups and downs of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period and during his old age he witnessed the plundering of the palaces of the leaders of the Taiping Rebellion by the Hsiang army. He saw them getting rich, buying land and houses and behaving as if they were masters of the

land. He saw how they became government officials, how they took advantage of their positions and how they usurped justice in their dealings with the common people. My grandfather being poor had nothing to offer these people; and although he never suffered from their oppression, he never had a good word to say about them. My father was the only son and because I was the eldest grandson, the love that my grandparents bore me was particularly touching. When I thought about it, I always feel like having a good cry over their graves.

MY FATHER was of quite a different temperament from my grandfather. He was timid, honest and not very effectual. He was used to taking insult without protest, always "swallowing tears" as it were. My mother was quite different—strong and capable and would staunchly defend her principles. She was nevertheless polite, frugal and affable. She enjoyed the reputation of being an amiable person. If my father had not the assistance of my mother, it would have been quite unthinkable.

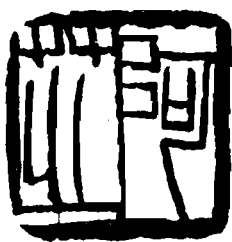
Speaking of my mother, it is a long story. Her maiden name was Chou. Her family lived very near Star Pond. Her father Chou Ya Jo was a local tutor. She married my father when she was seventeen. On her wedding day, my grandmother, as was the custom, looked over her dowry-box. My mother was a little embarrassed because, being poor, there was very little of value in the box. My grandmother said, being herself from a poor family, "A good girl does not depend on her dowry; a family gets prosperous on its own strength." My mother was deeply touched, and so, only three days after her wedding, she started working in the kitchen and attended to all household affairs. She was always very courteous to her parents-in-law and whenever she had some good food, she always gave it to them first before having her own share. In our village we used to dry hay for fuel. Very often the hay contained some bits of grain and my mother would use a rod to beat it. In a year, she would collect something like five pecks which she would use to exchange for cotton. We grew some jute near the grounds of our house and my mother would occupy herself with weaving cotton in Spring and jute in Summer. Thus, ever since my mother's advent, everyone

began to wear clothing made of material woven by her, and my grandparents were always given the first choice and my father second, and then herself. Within two years the family had a trunkful of clothing. My grandparents never had so much worldly possession and they were very happy. They used to say, "Our daughter-in-law has a pair of marvellous hands." My mother also reared a good number of ducks and chickens as well as pigs, which all contributed to the family's subsistence. Although all these meant a great deal of patience and hardship, we were in essence a happy family.

The year I was born my grandfather was fifty-six years old, my grandmother fifty-one, my father twenty-five and my mother nineteen. I was quite a weakling and fell ill rather frequently. The doctor used to order that I should refrain from eating this and that, including meat, fish and greasy things. That was when I was still a suckling baby. Because of what the doctor said, my mother went on diet, avoiding all the things that I was not supposed to touch for fear that they might affect the quality of her milk. Of course, poor people did not have much meat or fish anyway, but on festivals, we would have a little of each, but my mother would scrupulously stay away from them. That was the way she tried to preserve my health. When I come to think of it, I often feel that I owe her a great deal and regret that I was not able to spend more time with her when I grew up.

I was given the name "Shun Chih" and my grandparents all called me "Ah Chih." When I became a carpenter, my employers all called me "Carpenter Chih." The more courteous ones called me "Master Carpenter Chih." My fancy name was "Wei Ch'ing," but my grandfather gave me another "Lan Ting." The name "Huang" by which I was generally known was given by my tutor, who also called me "Pin Sheng." Not far from my home was a mail-station called "Pai Shih P'u" (White Stone Market) and so my tutor gave me another appellation "White Stone Hermit," but people would just call me "Pai Shih." So I always called myself "Ch'i Pai Shih." I had other names like "Wood Devotee," "Woodman," and so on, all of which testified to my having been a carpenter, a fact which was not to be forgotten. I had yet other names like "The Old Citizen of Apricot Valley," "The Descendant of the Old House at Star Pond," "The Old Farmer of Hsiang," which are used to

commemorate the locale where I was born. "Ch'i Ta" is a play on the proverb "Ch'i ta fei ou" which also aptly signified my state of being the first born. "Chi Yuan", "Chi P'ing," "Lao P'ing," "Ping Weng," "Chi P'ing T'ang Chu Jen," "Chi Huan Hsien Nu" – all these to signify my state of being constantly on the move like duckweed (p'ing) in the wind. Also the character "P'ing" is homophonous with the word "Pin." (瀕) The names "Chieh Shan Yin Kuan Chu Che," "Chieh Shan Weng" (Borrowed Hill Old Man) were used to remind me that I should be contented wherever I happened to be. "A Richman with Three Hundred Stone Seals" is an ironic way of saying that I possessed three hundred stone seals. All these *nom de plumes* have been used on my paintings or seals. After I attained middle age, people including foreigners, knew me only as "Ch'i Huang," or "Pai Shih," to the neglect of all the others. None knew the name "Ch'i Shun Chih" except my village elders.



Ah Chih.

Chapter 2 Beginnings (1864-1870)

DURING THE years 1864 to 65 when I was between two and three, I was the constant concern of my parents and grandparents, owing to my bad health. We were also too poor to afford the sort of medicine prescribed by my doctors and so had to ask for credit from the herbalists. We were all very superstitious. Two days out of three, my grandmother and my mother would go to a nearby temple and prayed for my health. They kowtowed and knocked their heads against the floor until their forehead became swollen like a big persimmon. There were also witch-doctors in my village and my grandmother and mother would get them to come, but my poor health persisted in spite of everything. Somehow, as I grew older, my health

improved and in the Winter of the 5th year of T'ung Ch'ih (1866), when I was four, I completely recovered.

My grandfather often carried me in his arms and played with me. He had a black coat made of goat's fur. It was in a rather poor condition but that was his best article of worldly possession. In Winter, he would tuck me inside his great coat and when I fell asleep, he would hug me very firmly. He always said that having a grandson sleeping close to his chest was the happiest thing in his life. He was fifty-nine then. When the weather was very cold, he would carry me in his arms sitting near a fire and he would use a poker to write my name "Chih" on the ashes. He would say, "This is your name Chih, look at it and don't forget." To tell the truth, my grandfather's vocabulary was very limited, not more than, say, three hundred, and he only half understood some of them. But the word "Chih" he knew quite well. My grandfather would, at intervals of two or three days, teach me one new word and then review the old ones. I was not too dull and I soon remembered all the words he taught me.

During the years 1867-69 my only tutor was my grandfather. Using a pine branch as pen, I would trace out characters on the ground. Sometimes they looked quite all right to me. Sometimes I would draw pictures of heads with round eyes, broad jaws, somewhat like the fat neighbour next door; and when I added a beard to a face, it would look like the cashier of the little store across the street. When I was six years old, a certain district officer of Huang Mao Tui Tsu paid a visit to our village. How he got promoted was not known, but in those days anyone could buy an official position by paying a few hundred taels of silver. There was a lot of fanfare on the day of his arrival and our village people turned out in force to have a look at the new official. My mother asked me whether I wanted to go too and I said quite peremptorily, "I don't want to go." My mother said to me afterwards, "You are quite right. What's the point of going to see the official? We depend on our two hands for our livelihood. What has an official to do with us?"

When I was seven, my grandfather had exhausted his vocabulary and so he repeated and repeated the characters he had taught me and in time I became very familiar with them. In the last

month of that year, my grandfather said, "Well, let's have our holiday earlier this year." He was full of praise for me for knowing so many words. On one occasion, after saying that he was glad about my intelligence, he heaved a sigh as if there was something in his mind. My mother understood why my grandfather sighed, which was because he was unable to afford sending me to school to continue my study, and she said to my grandfather, "I have saved a little money which I deposited with a silversmith over the hill. I intended to save a bit more so that I could get a pair of gold hairpins for myself, but I have

changed my mind. Why not let me get the money back and buy some paper and books for Ah Chih so that he could study with my father next year? That money will probably be enough for a year's tuition. After that, he can read a bit and be able to write letters and do some bookkeeping." And so it was decided there and then that I should go to school next year, to the great joy of my grandfather.

Thus, at the age of eight, I started going to the little school in Feng Lin T'ing on a hill-slope to the north of Pai Shih P'u about three *li* from my home. My mother made me a blue jacket. Worn



Bell-wearer.

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*"My grandmother would only feel glad
When she heard the sound of the bell
Which heralded my safe return"*

over my old black quilted gown, it made me look quite well-dressed. At the school the first thing I did was to kowtow before a commemorative tablet of Confucius, and then afterwards kowtow to my maternal-grandfather, who was to be my tutor. Of course I did not have to pay tuition. My grandfather took me to school in the morning and back home in the evening. Although three *li* was not a long journey, the road was full of mud. It was not too bad on ordinary days, but when rain came it was terrible. Yellow mud is extremely slippery and if you are not careful, you will fall. My grandfather usually carried an umbrella in his right hand and a rice basket in the other, and when the road was really bad he would carry me on his back. In school I was taught the *Three Character Classic*, the *One Hundred Surnames* and the *Four Character Phrase Book*. Since I already knew some three hundred characters, I found everything quite easy and I was one of the best in the class. Soon I was taught the *Poems by a Thousand Authors*, and I found it quite enjoyable. The more I read it, the more I liked it. Although I recite many of the poems, I could understand only half of them. My favourite ones were always on my lips.

IN THOSE days, studying means learning by rote. There was what we called "backing the book" which means that the pupil recites passages with his back to the book, fluently and without hesitation. Calligraphy was also an important part of the curriculum. What my maternal-grandfather taught me was first to trace out characters from a copy-book printed in red by the woodblock process. Compared to writing with a pine branch on the ground, this was a great improvement. My grandfather presented to me a broken ink-stick and a cracked ink-stone. These he had treasured for a long time and were the only items of the "four treasures of the study" in his possession. He had saved these for his own use, to keep accounts, and he seldom took them out. So, with a new brush and some copy paper, the "four treasures" were complete. It was a happy day for me and from then on I spent a lot of time tracing, tracing, tracing. I got somewhat tired of the routine and started to draw.

It happened that over the doors of my neighbour was hung a picture of the Thunder God. It was customary for a family with a new born

baby to hang such a picture on the wall, to dispel ghosts and evil spirits. It was rather coarsely done, with red ink on yellow paper, probably by some village painter. When my second brother was born, we had the same sort of painting on the wall and I was quite familiar with it. The more I looked at the picture, the more I wanted to imitate the drawing. So, after school one day, I took out my brush and ink-stone and started to draw. It was a poor effort. The Thunder God that I drew looked more like a funny parrot and so I tried and tried again, but still I could not get the likeness. So I took a sheet of used translucent bamboo paper, put it over the painting on the wall and started to trace the picture. This time it was different. It was so good that I had to do another for one of my classmates. From then on my interest in drawing grew. Because my classmates talked about it, other students came to ask for my drawings. I had often to tear sheets from my exercise books and use them to draw pictures for them. I first started to draw old fishermen. It was not easy and I had to try and try. Then I drew flowers, plants, birds, animals, insects, fishes, cows, horses, pigs, sheep, fowls, shrimps, crabs, frogs, sparrows, butterflies, dragonflies and so on—all the things that I used to see. These are the things I loved best. Nobody ever saw a Thunder God, and so however hard I tried to draw him, the results were always disappointing.

In that year my mother gave birth to my third brother Shun Tsao and as usual, the Thunder God was hung, but this time I did not draw it. I liked to draw for my classmates things that I saw around me and I did this quite often, using up a lot of paper. My maternal-grandfather was familiar with the "Family Mottoes" of Chu Po Lu and he often mumbled something like this, "We must constantly remember that every bowl of rice or congee is not easy to come by; we must keep in mind that every thread and strand of silk is precious material." Which are two well-known sayings in that book. When he saw me using up so much paper on such a useless pursuit as drawing, he used to reprimand me with: "You're only playing and not engaged in proper business. Look, how much good paper you have wasted." School children in those days were afraid of their teachers, especially his inevitable ruler, which was often used to beat on their out-stretched palms. I was not normally mischievous and seldom had to

suffer the indignity of being beaten with a ruler. Once or twice my maternal-grandfather was angry with me for using too much paper, but being very fond of me and in view of my being quite a hardworking boy, I never suffered the usual punishment. In any case, I was so addicted to drawing that it would be quite impossible for me to give it up, and so, in order to avoid spending money on paper, I searched everywhere for used wrapping paper. Autumn came, and I was studying the Confucian Analects when my mother called me to her and said, "It's a bad year and there is not enough money for you to carry on this year's study." I had then to stop studying. We kept ourselves alive by eating yam which my mother taught me to cook over a cow-dung fire. After digging up all the yam we went for wild vegetables. In later years, every time I drew a yam I always thought about the circumstances of those times. I once wrote: "What can conquer my hunger is worth more than half a year of stored food. When I am successful, I should not forget how well it tasted." The sufferings of the poor can only be understood by the poor themselves. It cannot be communicated to the rich.



*When I was young I hung
my books on a buffalo's
horns.*

Chapter 3 From Wood-cutting and Cow-herding to Carpentering (1871-77)

DURING THE years 1871-73 I stayed at home helping out in carrying water, tending to household affairs, planting vegetables and generally taking care of my two younger brothers. The most important work I did was to gather firewood for fuel. When there was a surplus, we sold it. I was not being idle. What I liked most was cutting firewood. Children in the neighbourhood would go with me up the hills and then after gathering enough firewood, we would take a rest and some of us would play games using little bundles of firewood. We would each take out a bundle, stand

them on the ground so that the top end of each bundle would recline against the others like a pyramid. Each of us would in turn throw a length of firewood from a distance against the bundle. Whoever succeeded in demolishing the pyramid won and the stake was usually a bundle of firewood. In this way we could spend enjoyable a good part of the afternoon.

Whenever I had any time I would review the few books that my maternal-grandfather taught me. I also practised calligraphy. As for drawing, this I did only secretly. I would not any more tear paper from my exercise books but used paper from old account books.

When I was eleven, my grandfather rented several *mou* of rice-field and reared a buffalo. So every day I cut wood, took care of the buffalo and at the same time looked after my second brother so that he did not have to be in my mother's way. My health was not good at all and a fortune teller had said about me: "The child is under the influence of the planet Mercury. To avoid calamity, something must be done to ward off its influence." So my grandmother bought me a bronze bell and tied it round my neck with a red string and said to me, "Ah Chih, you take your second brother up the hill and take good care of the buffalo, cut some wood and when dusk falls, I will wait for you at the door. When I hear the bell, I shall know you are coming back and I'll get your dinner ready." My mother also bought a bronze plaque to serve as good-luck charm, on which was engraved the name of Amitabha Buddha and tied it together with the bell. She said, "With this charm, tigers and leopards and ghosts and spirits up the hills will not dare to come near you." I regret to say that these two ornaments were lost during the civil war in the 1919's. But later on I specially made replicas of them and hanged them on my belt. I also made a seal engraved with the characters "Bell-Hanger" and wrote the following poem on a painting of a buffalo:

*Round Star Pond apricot blossoms per-
fumed the air;
I took a yellow buffalo and walked
towards the east.
I had a bell on me, my kind mother's
idea;
Now I am myself a bell-listening old man.*

I ALWAYS took some books with me when I went up the hills so as to relieve much of the tedium of looking after the buffalo, picking up cow-dung and cutting firewood. One day I was concentrating on some passages and forgot about everything else, so that when it was time to go home I realised I had gathered very little firewood. After dinner when I was taking my brush out to practise writing, my grandmother said to me, "Ah Chih, your father is my only son; you're my eldest grandson. You are as precious to us as a pearl that glows at night. We thought that our family has added a good helping hand. When you were small and weak, your mother and I were extremely worried for you, burning incense, praying all the time. Now when we lack firewood at home, you would only spend time practising hand-writing and not doing anything useful. We all know the saying: 'After three days of wind and four days of rain, can good literature be boiled in the pot and served as food?' If we do not have rice tomorrow, Ah Chih, what do you propose to do? You mean to say you can fill your stomach with a book and a brush? It is a pity that you were born into the wrong kind of family."

I knew that it was out of good intention that my grandmother said this, hoping that I would thereby make more efforts to help our poor family. From then on, although I still brought along some books whenever I went up the hills, I would hang them on the buffalo's horn and not touch them until I had picked enough dung and cut enough firewood. When I was in school, I had not finished reading the Confucian Analects. Whenever I had the chance, I would make a detour, stop at my maternal grandfather's place and resolve my difficulties with him.

It was customary in our village for children to be "married" when very young; that is, the girl came and lived in the boy's family after a simple ceremony which included making obeisances to the ancestors and heads of the family. Normally, the girl would be slightly older than the boy, so that she could already start doing some housework. It was in a sense a betrothal. It was not until the boy and the girl became adults that they really lived together. The girl was called "child foster-daughter-in-law." This happened usually when the girl's family was poor and was glad to have her taken care of by someone as early as possible.

Thus, in the year 1874 when I was twelve, on the 21st day of the first month, I was "married" to a girl called Ch'en Ch'un Chun. She was my senior by one year and being used to housework she was a great help and was often praised by my grandparents. I was quite happy but I never showed it because it was not proper to do so. Thus, she and I contented ourselves by throwing silent glances at one another.

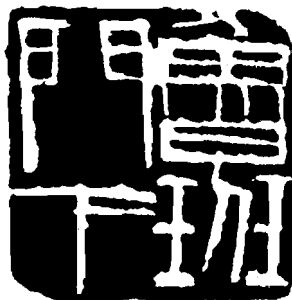
In the same year my grandfather died. When I thought about him, teaching me to write with a pine branch, keeping me warm in his black goat-skin overcoat, taking me to school—all these memories rushed forth and I couldn't stop my tears. I cried for three days and nights. I could not eat anything. My grandmother was crying hard too, but when she saw me in such a condition, she said, "Don't cry so hard; you're weak and your grandfather wouldn't like to see you so run down." My father and mother also tried to stop me from crying, but I could not control myself. This was the first misfortune that happened to me. We had very little money then, only sixty silver *yuan*, but we managed to give my grandfather a dignified funeral.

During the years 1875-76, we were not doing too well. There was only my father to take care of the farm and it was a great strain on him. My mother always said this to me, "Ah Chih, I only wish you had grown-up brothers to help your father support the family." In our village, we used firewood for fuel and in the Summer of the year when I was thirteen, there was plenty of rain so that I was unable to go up the hills for firewood. Sometimes when we ran out of rice, we would dig up some wild vegetable and bake it, using dried cow-dung for fuel. Sometimes when the stove had not been used for some time, the rain-water that had seeped in would remain there, a good breeding ground for frogs.

WHEN I WAS fourteen, my mother gave birth to my fourth brother Shun P'ei and for some months, my wife helped to take care of the baby. As I have said, my health was poor and other than picking firewood and cow-dung, taking care of the buffalo, doing some odd jobs at home, I never did anything in the fields. So, one day my father said to me, "You're not too young to learn some farming now." Then he taught me the use of the plough.

For many days I was struggling hard, being unable to control the plough nor the buffalo. My father also taught me how to sow seeds and this caused more fatigue. I had to bend my back all day long with my feet soaked in water. On one occasion, after a day's work, I was washing my feet when suddenly I felt a sharp pain on one of my feet as if inflicted by a pair of pincers. I saw blood coming out from one of my toes. I heard my father say, "It's a grass-shrimp that has bitten my boy."

When I was fifteen (1877), my father realised that I was not fit to be a farm-worker. He considered sending me away to learn a handicraft. It occurred that one of our relatives, a carpenter, visited us during the New Year festival and during dinner, my father persuaded him to take me on as an apprentice. So it came to pass that after some ceremony I was officially accepted as an apprentice. My instructor was a so-called "large-wood craftsman," that is, doing all kinds of coarse structures like building the frame of a hut, ordinary tables and beds, and so on. The real test came when my instructor took me to a building site, and I found to my distress that I was not strong enough and could not carry large logs. So after sometime, my instructor decided that I should not continue being a carpenter's apprentice. My father got another instructor for me. He was named Ch'i Ch'ang Ling, a very considerate person. He often said, "If you go on doing it, you will be able to do it." I remember one day when he and I had finished work on a building site and three persons who looked like carpenters were walking towards us. Since they were all carpenters, I did not take too much notice of them. But to my surprise, when they came near us, my instructor stood at attention and smiling with his hands down, bowed to them. The three only nodded acknowledgement, in a rather haughty manner. When they had left, I asked my instructor why he behaved so humbly towards them since we were all carpenters, to which he replied, "Child, you don't know courtesy. We are craftsmen of coarse articles, but they are craftsmen of refined ones. They can carve and make artistic things. Unless you're clever, you just can't do it. How can we compare ourselves to them." From that day on I made up my mind to be a "small-wood craftsman."



*Student of Lu Pan
(God of Carpentry).*

Chapter 4 From Flower-carver to Painter, 1878-1889

IN 1878 when I was sixteen, my grandmother and my mother, considering that my health had disqualified me as a carpenter, discussed the matter with my father in the hope that he would agree to let me change to another line of business. So I expressed my wish to be a "small-wood craftsman" and my father very quickly succeeded in persuading a certain flower-carver called Chou Chih Mei to take me on as an apprentice. He was thirty-eight and was well-known in the trade as an expert carver. He was particularly good at carving figures. We got on extremely well. I admired his talent and was interested in learning his craft. He thought I was intelligent and a good apprentice and, as he had no children, he treated me like a son. He went so far as to say to others, "This apprentice of mine will get somewhere in the future and I shouldn't be surprised that he will become famous one day and I shall feel honoured for having taught him something." People thought me promising too and I could never forget the goodwill my instructor cherished towards me. When I was seventeen, I suffered a serious ailment, coughing blood several times. I was on the brink of death. Needless to say, my parents were extremely concerned about me. My mother had just given birth to my fifth brother Shun Chun and she felt quite helpless. Fortunately, a certain herbalist called Chang came to my rescue, but I had lost considerable time in my apprenticeship. It was customary for the duration of apprenticeship to be a little over three years, but because of my illness, that had to be prolonged. However, I finally graduated. This was a great event and my family celebrated it by inviting several dozen people to

dinner. This happened just when Ch'un Chun and I became husband and wife in fact, not in name only. She was now twenty and I well over nineteen. Although I had completed my apprenticeship, I still attached myself to instructor Chou and served as his assistant. It did not take long for my name to be known a hundred miles around my village. People called me Wood-worker Chih and sometimes even Master Chih when they felt inclined to be polite towards me. My family was still not well off and so I gave my mother all the money I earned. My instructor and I often went to work in the home of Ch'i Pe Ch'ang and I got to know his son Kung Fu. We both became good friends.

In those days, flower-carvers were fond of using traditional subjects like flower basket, unicorn, plum, peach and so on. I always thought that variety was essential in art. I drew grapes, pomegranates, plums, peaches, pears, apricots, peonies, plum flowers, orchids, bamboos, chrysanthemums and so on. For figures, I used subjects from novels and historical anecdotes. This at once became popular and I was greatly encouraged. But my family's economic conditions were still far from being good, although I managed to make more money by now. My wife Ch'un Chun was very hard-working and she never complained. When our neighbours asked how she was doing, she always said, "Very well." But it was difficult to hide things from our neighbours and on one occasion, a woman next door said to my wife provocatively, "Why do you want to suffer poverty here. With your ability, would there be any difficulty finding a wealthier husband?" But Ch'un Chun, smiling, replied, "I know my deserts. There is no need for you to plan on my behalf." When I was twenty, I came by chance upon a copy of *The Mustardseed Garden, a Handbook of Painting*, printed in five colours in the reign of Ch'ien Lung. Although it was not a complete set, I was able to follow its instructions and use it as a guide. Only then did I realise that what I had been drawing were far from being accurate. So I started all over again. Since the book was not mine and I could not afford to buy another set, I spent half a year tracing out all the pictures and ever since then I had been using specimens from the book as models for my carvings.

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The painter's ink-slab and teapot.

WHAT I earned from my carvings was still not sufficient to maintain my family. My mother was still worrying about "the seven matters upon opening the door"¹ and my grandmother often denied herself food in order to give it to me. I could not look at the situation without making some efforts to improve it. So I spent a lot of my evenings making carvings and on the following morning took them to the shops in White Stone Market for sale on consignment. I made tobacco boxes, using buffalo horn. It was quite popular. I could produce one every two or three evenings and after deducting the twenty per cent commission, I could buy a peck of rice with the proceeds. Smoking was already in vogue in those days and I had early developed a taste for tobacco. There were two types of tobacco smoking. One was "han yen", dry-smoking, using the whole leaf, and the other kind is "shui yen," wet-smoking, using shredded leaves in a water pipe. I smoked both kinds. Now that my tobacco boxes were finding a market, I could afford to indulge in the luxury. When I was twenty-one (1883), Ch'un Chun had her first pregnancy. In spite of her condition, when we had used up our firewood at home, she had to go up the hill at the back of our hut to get firewood. It was a very strenuous climb. When her pregnancy was at an advanced stage, she sometimes had to crawl going up the hill. Our first child was a girl and we gave her the name Chu Ju.

Between 1884 and 1888, I carried on as a flower-carver, meanwhile making tobacco boxes as a side-line. Ever since I made a copy of the *Mustardseed Garden*, I had painted every one of those pictures several times over. I was quite an adept and my name soon spread. I was often paid for my paintings although sometimes I received presents instead. The name Carpenter Chih was always associated with painting. I used to say, "One should speak a language that people can understand, and paint things that people can see." The Thunder Gods that I used to paint I now considered unworthy of my art. After all, the Thunder God was a fictitious figure. I preferred painting figures in old costumes because they were actually worn by the ancients and were illustrated in the *Mustardseed Garden*. After seeing an opera I would draw figures in costumes used in the

¹They are firewood, rice, oil, sugar, sauce, vinegar and salt.

opera. I was quite well-known in my village now. Most people asked me to paint pictures of gods such as the Jade Emperor, Lao Tzu, God of Fortune, God of the Kitchen, Yama, the Dragon God, the Thunder God, God of Lightning, the Rain God, the Wind God, Cow-Head, Horse-Face, the Four Guardians of Buddhist Temples, Door Gods, and so on. Although I did not like drawing these things, I did it for the sake of the fees which were one thousand coins per picture. Of course I sometimes painted to please my village relatives or friends. Sometimes my drawings were benevolent-looking figures, using pictures from the *Mustardseed Garden* as models, but it was difficult to draw fierce-looking figures. It won't do to make all figures look like the Thunder God! So I used some extraordinary looking persons among members of my circle as models and when I had finished the pictures, I was often amused at the results.

By the time I was twenty-six I had five brothers and three sisters and my family consisted of fourteen members. We were all busy working, some of us tending the fields, some picking firewood and others taking care of the buffalo. My grandmother was now seventy-seven and all she could do was to watch the young children play. Besides looking after the poultry and watering the vegetables, Ch'un Chun helped my mother to weave. She would sit under the shade of a vine-lattice weaving. I was often away from home and when I came back I was often a little annoyed by the monotonous sound of the shuttle. When I think of it now, the sound was rather sweet and I am somewhat nostalgic about it. Many years after, I wrote a poem about this:

*My wife laughed at me for wasting my
life.*

*Always travelling abroad in bad health
and times.*

*The sound of weaving from underneath
the vine's shade—*

*I loathed it then but yearn now to hear
it again.*

At this juncture I must record my indebtedness to someone called Hsiao Hsiang Kai, an accomplished painter, although by profession a paper-craft artist. I owed my first lessons to this

sanguine man. It was when I was twenty-seven (1889) that I first met Mr. Hu Ch'in Yuan who came to see me for a picture. He was impressed with my skill and one day he asked me earnestly, "Do you want to start studying as well as learning to paint?" to which I replied, "I do want to study and paint, but I am too poor to be able to afford it." He said, "Don't worry, as long as you have the will, you can study and sell pictures at the same time. Come and see me when you are free."

Mr. Hu Ch'in Yuan was a generous, straightforward and amiable person. He was a collector as well as an accomplished painter, calligrapher and poet. He often invited friends to his home, making verses together. "Round the table there are always many guests; inside the bottle there is no lack of wine." So, one day I called on him. He was entertaining friends, but glad to see me. He invited me to stay for lunch and presented me to the private tutor employed by his family, called Ch'en Tso Hsun, a well-known scholar of Hsiang T'an. Mr. Hu said to me during lunch, "If you want to study you can call Mr. Ch'en our tutor right now, but what would you parents say?" I said, "My parents will of course respect your wish, but unfortunately we are too poor. . . ." at which Mr. Hu interrupted me, "Didn't I tell you that you can sell your paintings to support your family? Your paintings are saleable, so don't worry." I said, "But I am afraid I am too old and it's too late." Mr. Hu said, "Haven't you read the Three Character Classic? There it says:

Su Lao Ch'uan
At twenty-seven
Began serious studies.

YOU'RE NOW exactly twenty-seven, why don't you learn from Su Lao Ch'uan?" Mr. Ch'en took up the conversation and said, "If you really want to study I shall waive your tuition fee." All the others at the table spoke to the effect that since I could study under the expert guidance of Mr. Ch'en and learn painting from Mr. Hu, I need not worry about remaining obscure. When I told Mr. Hu that I was eternally grateful to him for his generosity, he said, "Quite calling me Mr. Hu. Just call me teacher." So the matter was decided there and then. After lunch, as custom would have it, I made the usual obeisances before a commemora-

tive tablet of Confucious and forthwith became a student of Mr. Hu and Mr. Ch'en.

I settled down in the Hu family. My instructors gave me the name Huang and the fancy name Pin Sheng. Because I lived near the White Stone Village, I was called White Stone Hermit. The last was used as signature on my paintings. Mr. Ch'en said to me one day, "It is always best to be able to write poems so that you can put them on your paintings. Go and study the *Three Hundred T'ang Poems*. This book is enjoyed by all, both the learned and ordinary people. It is commonly said that even the uninitiated will be able to make poetry if they know the *Three Hundred T'ang Poems* by heart." I knew the volume called *Poems by One Thousand Authors* when I was young and so I was able to enjoy the *Three Hundred T'ang Poems* like meeting old friends. After two months, Mr. Ch'en asked me, "How many poems do you know now by heart?" and when I told him that I knew almost all the three hundred T'ang poems, he was somewhat skeptical. But when he took some poems at random and examined me on them, he was convinced that I told the truth. From there I proceeded to study *Mencius* and as a kind of recreation I read *The Strange Stories of a Chinese Studio* and the *Essays of the Eight Masters of T'ang and Sung*. I found reading the greatest pleasure in life. I had then started to draw flowers, birds, grass and insects. Mr. Hu always told me this, "Stones should be lean, trees should be curved, birds should live and your hands should be practised." He let me study his collection of paintings and calligraphy. He also introduced me to one T'an Li Sheng and wanted me to study landscape painting with him. Mr. Hu would often inscribe my paintings with poems of his and was fond of telling me, "Go and study poetry. It would be a pity not to be able to inscribe poems on your paintings."

It was Spring, the waterlilies were blossoming. Mr. Hu's friends were all making poems and they invited me to take part. So I plucked up courage and presently completed a seven-character quatrain. My heart pounded fast and I was afraid I had made a fool of myself. But Mr. Hu, smiling, said of my poem, "Not bad, not bad," at the same time reading it aloud. Everyone thought I had great talent and I was glad that his first shot of mine made an impact.

In the same year my first son was born and we called him Liang Yuan. Living with the Hu family was most pleasant. I was making good income out of my drawings. Photography was not yet common and I was doing good business portraying the rich. For every portrait, I received two taels of silver. That was not bad. From that time onwards, I put aside the chisel and took up the writing-brush instead. Between the age of twenty-eight and thirty-two, I depended on drawing for my living. Although I was much better off than before, I often went to bed groping in the dark for lack of oil for the lamp. Sometimes I had no light except that from burning pinewood and did a lot of reading this way. I distinctly remembered I read the Po Chu-I volume called *Ch'ang Ch'ing Chi* in this manner. When I was seventy, I wrote a poem entitled "To my Children Recalling Past Events," which describes this episode:

*In my poor village I started learning very late,
And never seriously studied till I was twenty-seven.
What harm was there, not having oil for fuel?
I used to burn pine branches and read T'ang poetry.*



Kitchen for cooking pictures.

Chapter 5 Fame comes slowly

AT THIRTY (1892), my painting business expanded as I became better-known. My mother's knitted brows began to relax and my grandmother once said to me, smiling, "Ah Chih, you haven't done injustice to your writing-brush. I used to say that you couldn't cook a meal with books, but now I can see that you can with your paintings." I began to extend my activities into landscape painting, flowers, birds and so on, besides portraiture. The women especially wanted me to draw historical figures like Mu Lan and Wen Chi. Those

figures pleased them so much that they jokingly called me Ch'i The Beautiful. In fact, my drawings were far from perfect, but there was no competition around. There were, however, a few snobs who would ask me to paint, but did not want me to inscribe my name on the pictures because they thought I did not belong to the elite. I thought this was ridiculous. However, since they paid, I thought nothing of it. In the same year, I learned the art of mounting pictures.

I had begun to join a poetry group. My friends' poem were usually rather formal, full of classical allusions and clever rhymes, but not always inspired. I believe that poetry should be concerned with the spirit and although form is important, it is the spirit that gives poetry life. Thus, although I did not have the skill of my friends, my poems were not necessarily less pleasing. The group had no fixed days for meeting. We gathered together and talked about poetry and literature in general and sometimes calligraphy, painting, seal-engraving as well as song-writing. We had borrowed some rooms in a monastery in Five-Dragon Hill and we called our group the Dragon Hill Poetry Society. It was a quiet well-wooded retreat, a kind of summer resort. The nucleus of the Society consisted of Wang Chung Yen, Lo Chen Wu, Lo Hsing Wu, Chen Fu Ken, T'an Tsu Ch'uan, Hu Li San and myself. People called us The Seven Scholars of Dragon Hill. They all wanted me to be president of the Society. At first I resisted the idea because as far as learning and social position were concerned, I was much their inferior. I thought they were pulling my leg, but when Wang Chung Yen said, "Don't be stubborn. You're the oldest amongst us. If you will not take up the job, who will? Don't stand on ceremony any more." Against this I had no defence.

Soon another poetry society was formed meeting in Li Sung An's place and was called the Lo Shan Poetry Society. Lo Shan and Dragon Hill were about fifty *li* apart and in spite of the distance, many of us of Dragon Hill also joined the Lo Shan. When I was thirty-three (1895), drought hit our village. There was impending famine and the poorer villagers flocked to the wealthy families for meals. In those days, rich families always had their granaries well stocked and it was customary for the poor in days of difficulty to line up outside

their doors, usually in an orderly manner, to ask for food. They would do their cooking there and were in general considerate enough to go away after several meals and seek help elsewhere. But other groups would arrive. Since we sometimes turned out in force to attend poetry meetings at the Li family, people sometimes wondered why we self-proclaimed poets should join the refugee ranks.

My presence at both poetry societies was particularly welcomed, one of the reasons being that I could make hand-painted letter paper. This was used for poetry writing. White paper did not seem good enough to write poems on. Very often I spent nights drawing flowers, birds, fishes, shrimps and landscape on letter-sized sheets for the benefit of my friends. They were not unappreciative and I have heard one of them say that since I had to spend evenings doing those paintings, the paper should be carefully used and preserved.

When I was thirty-four (1896) I began to take up calligraphy seriously. At first I practised the court style, that is, the formal type of writing used in court examinations. My two instructors wrote in the style of Ho Shao Chi and I had for some time followed their example. I once had a rather humiliating experience. I had asked someone from Ch'angha reputed to be a good seal-engraver to do a seal for me, on a piece of Shou Shan stone. After a few days I went to see if it was done, but he returned the stone to me, saying, "Polish it first before I'll do it." I looked at the piece of stone and found it to be as smooth as could be, but since he demanded it, I polished it again and took it back to him. He did not so much as look at the stone but put it aside. So after a few days I went to see him again and he handed me back the stone, saying, "It is not smooth enough, take it back and polish it." He was indeed arrogant and I am sure he did not think much of the piece of stone or myself. I thought, "Why should I suffer all this just for a seal!" So I took the stone back, and in the same evening, I did the engraving myself. When my host saw the stone next morning, he told me that my engraving showed more elegance than any done by the visitor from Ch'angha. I felt flattered as I knew I had little idea of engraving. From that day on, I practised real hard. I remembered particularly the advice of a skillful practitioner called Li T'ieh An, who said, "There is a lot of good stone in this area. Carry a

whole basketful home and start to engrave and erase, engrave and erase. When you have filled three or four *tien hsin*² boxes, you will have achieved something."

I NEVER travelled more than a hundred *li* from Apricot Valley until I was thirty-five, when a friend asked me to go to the city to do a portrait.

When I was thirty-seven, I was introduced to Mr. Wang Hsiang Ch'i, a famous artist, by Mr. Chang Chung Yang. I submitted some of my poems, paintings, seals and specimens of calligraphy for him to look at, and he said, "Your paintings and seal-engravings are remarkably like those of the monk Chi Shan." I felt greatly encouraged because Chi Shan was an accomplished artist, a descendant of the Sung poet Huang Shan Ku. To be compared to him was no mean honour, all the more so when the opinion was given by Wang Hsiang Ch'i. A lot of people claimed to be students of his because that would raise their prestige, but I had resisted several times being introduced to him because I was afraid people might think I was trying to boost myself. Wang Hsiang Ch'i did not realise that and was known to have said to someone, "Everyone has his own peculiar temperament. There is a bronze craftsman of Heng Yang named Tseng Chao Chi and the iron craftsman of Wu Shih Chai, Chang Chung Yang, and there is also this carpenter who is very industrious but never wanted to be my student." When Chang Chung Yang heard this, he came especially to acquaint me of it. He said, "Since Mr. Wang think so highly of you, why don't you go and seek his instructions. A lot of people wanted to be his students, but never succeeded. Why do you play hard-to-get?" I was in fact grateful for Mr. Wang's sentiment towards me and so I plucked up courage and on the eighteenth of the tenth month, I went with Chang Chung Yang to see him and officially became his student. But I felt that I was too uncouth and was always conscious that people might criticise me for being a climber. So I never dared to mention Mr. Wang's name in front of people, but I admired Mr. Wang very deeply. Chang Chung Yang once told me, "Our master thinks that your prose is quite presentable, but your poetry reads like Hsieh P'an of the Red Chamber Dream." That hit the nail on the head

² General name for pastries, cookies, tarts etc.

because I wrote that my heart commands without putting on too much embellishment and indeed my poetry somewhat resembles that character. About that time I engraved more than ten seals for some well-known members of the gentry, the T'an brothers, the eldest being T'an Yen K'ai. A certain Scholar Ting, a self-styled expert in seal-engraving spoke derogatively of me to the T'an brothers. They accordingly erased my engravings and instead invited Scholar Ting to do them all over again. When I heard about this, I said to myself, "Ting and I both took after the style of Ting Lung Hung and Huang Hsiao Sung. How can his engraving be right and mine wrong?" But I was sure sooner or later I would be vindicated and so I thought no more of it.

When I was thirty-eight, I did a painting for a wealthy salt merchant, who wanted his tour of the seventy-two peaks in Heng Mountains to be permanently recorded. The immensity of the landscape necessitated my making twelve scrolls each measuring six feet in height. In order to please the salt merchant, I used rather heavy colouring, so much so that I used up two catties of a pigment called "stone green" or malachite, to mention nothing else. To me this seemed quite ridiculous, but the salt merchant was very pleased with the result and gave me 320 taels of silver. That was a lot of money and people were greatly impressed by this. My prestige as a painter was greatly enhanced and demand for my paintings grew rapidly.

With the money I was able to move to Mei Kung Shrine. Here I could see many plum trees all around and so I called my abode "The Hundred Plum Book House." I built a small study and called it "Borrowed Hill Poetry Chamber" and planted some banana trees around it. In Summer

the banana trees gave good shade and in Autumn, during rainy nights, the rustling of the banana leaves gave rise to poetic thoughts. Here in this chamber, I wrote several hundred poems.

Mei Kung Shrine was not far from Star Pond and so Ch'un Chun and I often exchanged visits with my parents. There were many lily ponds, along the way, and during blossom time the perfume from the flowers was enchanting. I planted many lilies too in front of my house. Because the seed-pockets of the lilies attracted intruders, I built a little shed with hay and my two sons were ordered to keep watch there by turn. My elder son was twelve and they younger six. Ordinarily they would go up the hills to pick firewood and I was very glad they were hard-workers. One day, just after noon, I took a stroll by the pond and saw my younger son lying inside the shed which was so small it could hardly cover his whole length. He was fast asleep and his old clothes were wet through with sweat. I looked at the grass underneath and it was all dried up by the scorching sun. How could he stand the cruel heat, I thought, and he was so young. So I called him, "Liang Fu, are you asleep?" He sat up and looked sheepishly at me, afraid that I might scold him for taking a siesta. He was glad I ordered him to go back to the house.

1901: I was thirty-nine. Someone asked me why I used Borrowed Hill to name my house. I said, "That is simple enough. The hill is not mine. I borrowed it to please myself." To commemorate the occasion I painted a picture of "The Borrowed-Hill Poetry Chamber." In the same year, my grandmother died. When I thought about our poorer days and how she starved herself in order to save enough food for me, I felt as if my heart was being pierced by a knife.



Poverty improves poetry.