Chapter I
The Chinese Love of Nature

Any work on Hsu Hsia-k'o and his travels would be deficient without some sketch of the man's human and natural environment. Hsu's family, his life and the political conditions of his time will be discussed in Chapter II. In this introductory chapter I will attempt to present his natural environment, or more precisely, nature as it has been perceived by the Chinese from the dim past through Hsu's own time until the present.

My remarks will try to interpret the Chinese attitude toward nature and their appreciation of it as may be ascertained from records of various kinds. Like many other peoples, the Chinese have merely achieved a partial and biased understanding, conditioned as they are by their natural environment, their way of life, and tradition of thought.

In common with other races in their early stages of development, the ancient Chinese in their constant contact with nature evolved a complete mythology of gods and spirits who controlled the forces of nature and destinies of man. They connected their happinesses and sorrows with the phenomena of the physical universe. Although different powers were attributed to different deities and the deities were many, the overall attitude was monotheistic, as an impersonal spirit, Heaven, was the recognized omnipotent force. Later, other thoughts and beliefs arose and were widely held, but the belief in Heaven and the mutual influences between Heaven and man have continued to stand in the foreground and remain the one unshaken belief for all Chinese.

Heaven itself does not speak, but its will is manifested in
the phenomena of the physical universe. Hence, to divine the will of Heaven became the primary motive of the whole nation. The high and the low, the learned and the ignorant, all made unceasing attempts to decipher nature in order that they might discover the meaning concealed behind the myriad appearances of things, and model their ways according to it. A constellation could not wander outside its orbit, a tree could not bloom out of season, an earthquake could not occur anywhere, a stalk of rice could not bear a different number of ears, nor could an oddly glowing cloud be seen in the sky, without being duly noticed by these zealous watchers of nature and construed as a smile or frown of Heaven.

There is in this perfect reliance on nature no room for doubt and criticism, but plenty for fostering love and reverence. In this, the emperor was the first to set an example. With the advice, no doubt, of his ministers, he built an altar of Heaven and an altar of Earth before which he worshipped. In time he canonized certain mountains and worshipped there. He conferred honor on other mountains and appointed officials to be sky-watchers.

Most importantly, he made the rotation of seasons a set schedule for work as well as for occasions of celebration and rejoicing. Already the legendary Hsia dynasty is credited with an almanac which arranged the positions of the four seasons so that the beginning of the year concurred with the beginning of spring and the full moon always fell on the fifteenth of each month. While it was in use, appropriate ceremonies and festivities were devised to welcome the advent of each season. The farmer planned his work according to the twenty-four solar terms of the year, and everyone watched for the return of the equinoxes and solstices. As a result, the toils and pleasures of daily life were fraught with a consciousness of man's relation to the rotation of seasons. Life, in the idealized concept, was to be an ordered round of labor and celebration. So man had his being in nature, and his days were "bound to each by natural piety." Throughout the centuries,
this reverent intimacy with nature had time to grow deep roots to support a whole nation.

We will now consider how an understanding and appreciation of nature was fostered in two important social classes, the scholars and the peasants. The former were the most articulate and sensitive through their education and travel, and the farmers were the most numerous and most intimately linked with nature's changes in their daily life and work. The knowledge and understanding obtained by these two classes combined to constitute the traditional Chinese attitude toward nature.

The farmer hardly ever travelled farther than his own village or the nearest city, nor did he seek anything beyond the welfare of his "three mou" of fields. He knew nothing about such fanciful notions as the love and enjoyment of natural beauty. For all the forces of nature which affected him and his fields, he had the general term t'ien lao-yeh (Heavenly Old Master) which implied some affection akin to reverence.

The farmer's fields were his sole concern every day of the year, and here he learned nature's bounty as well as her niggardliness. He knew above all how his success depended upon the harmony between himself and the forces of nature. Because nature's clues must be detected, he bent his whole efforts toward that end and timed his work accordingly. While his face became weather-beaten and his back bent, his sensitivity to nature caused his shrewdness to become sharper and his wisdom more profound. His young son, who trotted by his side, learned about these things from an early age. Thus, generation after generation, this process went on and a sense of owning the familiar land and being owned by it became indelibly implanted in him. When we remember that the farmers formed the great bulk of the population, it is no wonder that nature became woven into the texture of China's daily life.

The legend of the ancient emperor carrying out the annual
ritual of ploughing and his empress carrying out the ritual of weaving began at least as early as the Warring States period (403-221 B.C.) when it was described in the Ku-liang chuan (Ku-liang Commentary) and the Kuo-yu (Conversations of the States). Seeing that agriculture was the foundation of the nation's wealth, emperors of later centuries were wise enough to follow this custom in order to elevate the position of the farmer to one of dignity. Some of them wrote poems to eulogize farming and weaving and had pictures of farming and weaving painted and carved, and ordered their ministers to write poems on them. Thus the grateful farmer was proud of the emperor's patronage and developed a sense of his own importance. Even though he might be poor and overworked, he drew comfort from the thought that he lived in dignified poverty.

The scholar, however, did not work the land. His feeling for nature was developed through education and travel.

The conventional scholar, whose every act had to be sanctioned by Confucius, was lucky that Confucius once approved a pleasure outing in the spring. A passage in the Lun Yu (Analects) relates how, when four of the master's disciples were in attendance, he asked them one by one what his ambition was. When it came to Tseng Hsi, the master said:

What about you?
The notes of the zithern he was softly finger- ing died away; he put it down, rose and replied saying, I fear my word will not be so well chosen as those of the other three. The master said, What harm is there in that? All that matters is that each should name his desire.

Tseng Hsi said, At the end of spring, when the making of the Spring Clothes has been completed, to go with the five times six newly-capped youths and six times seven uncapped boys, perform the lustration in the river, take the air at the Rain Dance altars, and then go home singing. The master heaved a deep sigh and said, I am with Tien.
His approval of Tseng Hsi's choice served as an authorization for scholars of later ages to enjoy themselves in spring, as innumerable references of it testify.

The scholar's attitude toward nature was largely formed by impressions and experiences of travel. An important saying which produced a tremendous effect upon the Chinese mind in favor of nature and of travel was made by Ssu-ma Ch'ien 司馬遷 (145-86 B.C.). This great historian of the Former Han dynasty travelled far and wide, freely acknowledging the beneficial influence of travel in forming his personality and helping in his understanding of people, places and nature. His method of acquiring a liberal education resulted in the proverbial saying: "To read 10,000 volumes of books and to walk 10,000 li of road."

The purpose of the 10,000 li walk was not merely to gain knowledge at first hand but acquaint oneself with nature so that one's personality might become broader and deeper. This was by far the most important function of travel. Unlike in Europe where travel was considered the finishing touch of one's education, in China it was a life-long activity.

It is astonishing to realize how much on the move an educated Chinese was bound to be all his life. In fact, the only time he spent at home was the period from birth to the end of his studying days when he was deemed ready to take the local examination. If he were successful, his travels would begin at once, first to the provincial capital and then to the national capital to compete in more examinations. Of the successful candidates, only few would get appointments far from home because it was usually forbidden for a man to hold office in his own province. Moreover, an official would be periodically reassigned to different locations. Thus, unless a man chose to retire early in life, he would for days on end ride in a cart, on horseback or in a boat and he would witness changes in natural scenery, feel the changes in climate, and see different ways of human life in the pursuance of his
career. In this manner, the experiences of travel awakened many a man's love of nature and increased the love of those who already had it.

Other opportunities for travel arose in the course of an official's career. One way was for the scholar to be a member of the emperor's retinue. Naturally, not many were honored in this manner, but some of them have left us interesting diaries of their travels with the emperor.

Another albeit rather unpopular opportunity to travel was exile. For misconduct or for offenses committed against the emperor, an official would receive a sentence of banishment to a remote place for a certain period of time. If he were lucky enough to escape the graver danger of arrest and escort in custody to the capital for trial, his place of exile was often in the borderlands. As long as the capital was north of the Yangtze, any place south of it was considered fit for banishment, but after the capital was transferred to Chien-yeh (Nanking) in 317, and the South became the center of culture, a banished official was exiled farther away to such places as Kweichow and Yunnan, and later, beyond the Great Wall.

Usually, it was men of integrity and a strong sense of justice who received such sentences, as it was only such men who would risk an emperor's wrath by pointing out his errors in personal conduct or state affairs. This is how Han Yu (768-824), poet and scholar of the T'ang dynasty (618-905), wrote of his banishment:

In the morning I submitted a memorial to the throne up above nine flights of stairs, In the evening I received a sentence of banishment to Ch'ao-yang, eight thousand li away.

The misfortune these men suffered brought about some results for which we have reason to be thankful. It was banishment
that gave men of literary gifts a chance for distant travel. Away
from the capital, scholars replaced political feuds with the quest
of natural beauty and the cultivation of literature. One has only
to open the works of any poet or the prose of any dynasty to find
how much was written in exile. How they inspired literary inter­
est and spread culture, and what they themselves gained on these
travels to strange places in expanding their personality and deep­
ening their understanding of nature, and of men through nature,
can be read in their prose and poetry. Those who went into exile
contributed more than the other travellers because they were more
mature and less preoccupied with ambitious projects than the newly­
appointed officials and under less restraint than those in the im­
perial retinue. Also, they were often men of greater worth and
talent.

Consider what Hsieh Ling-yun 謝靈運 (385-433) did in the
Eastern Chin dynasty (317-419). Hsieh, an aristocrat and poet,
was fond of doing things in grand style, so during his days of
banishment when he travelled far and wide in quest of natural
scenery, it was his custom to be followed by an entourage of sev­
eral hundred people. Wherever he went he would have his followers
open up roads to inaccessible places in the mountains. Once he
employed several hundred people in his entourage to build a road
from Shih-nin 始寧 to Lin-hai 臨海 in Chekiang. They caused
such a stir that the prefect, Wang Hsiu 王琇, took them to be
bandits when he was alerted of their appearance on the hills.

Southwestern Hunan and Kwangsi were virtually uncivilized
places in the T'ang period. It was Liu Tsung-yuan 柳宗元 (733­
819) who discovered the beautiful regions of Ling-ling in
Hunan and Liu-chou in Kwangsi and made them known to the pub­
lic by his delightful prose. These are merely some of the best
known things done by the best known banished officials.

It should also be remembered that most officials would have
their families with them on their travels, whether to an appointed
post or into banishment. Therefore, each member of their families would become acquainted with nature in his own way according to his individuality and capacity. Day after day on those long journeys travellers would "feed on the wind and sleep with the rain." They would go from the cultured north to the barbarous south, or to the mountainous west or far beyond the northern passes. So long was the journey that even after it was over the "trotting of the hoofs of the horses, the dust from the wheels of the cart" would cling to the memory of those who travelled by land, just as the mist trailing on the surface of a river at dusk and the glimpse of a luminous sky in the east at dawn from one's pillow on a boat would cling to the memory of those who travelled on the water.

For the scholar especially, these intrusions of nature into his travelling life became endearing and memorable recollections. Here are some lines written by an unknown Chinese poet who lived three thousand years ago:

At the time when we set out,
Willows bowed gracefully along the road;
Now that we are returning
Snowflakes fill the sky.

Emotion, mingled with the scenes of willows and snow, broods over these lines. The poet loses himself for a moment in his feelings and in his sensual perception of nature and is rewarded by nature with a heightened perception of her beauty. As long as the emotion is familiar to us and willows and snowflakes are seen by us, these lines will remain as fresh as if they had been written only yesterday.

This kind of identification with nature requires no great flights of the spirit. It is the result of an overflowing love for the life of this world, the human ties and their joys and sorrows. This very human and earthly love leads to a realization of the love of nature. How fine sensibility becomes through this
kind of experience can be seen from the old Chinese popular convention of choosing the willow tree as the symbol of parting. What more perfect symbol can be found for the feelings of parting than this tree? Whether in the spring, when its long stems of tender yellow make one's heart leap to look at them, or in the autumn, when the same branches have grown dry and gray and rustle in the west wind, it is sensitive to the tips of its drooping branches and seems to give sympathy and companionship to the parting company. Again, this kind of sensitivity shows that the Chinese, essentially an earth-bound people, do not leave this world to seek God. When they sense the spirit of nature, it is in moments of daydreaming when glimpses come to them through elusive forms of beauty - life, clouds, water, the willow tree - and in moments of sudden realization of the mysterious passage of time itself.

Thus for the Chinese, closely attuned to nature, life was reckoned by springs and autumns, springs with flowers and autumns with bright moons and red leaves. When the first leaf fell from the wu-t'ung tree, the whole world sensed the approach of autumn. So the custom was established for men to reckon the months by the seasonal flowers and fruits, and the days in relation to the shapes and phases of the moon. In a word, man and nature metaphorically interchanged personalities and appearances.

Having said so much about the Chinese understanding and appreciation of nature, it is in order to consider its limitations and biases. Two general observations have been made in modern times regarding this subject. One is that the Chinese people abhor travel, and the other is that they prefer sites with a historical past. Both observations are generally true, but they need clarification.

Anyone acquainted with Chinese literature will be ready to affirm the Chinese people's great attachment to home and dislike of travel. Although the prose and poetry of exiled officials are
full of laments over the hard fate which had befallen them, closer examination of their writings and personal histories reveals quite a different picture. The days of journey and exile, one will find, were put to good use and were as beneficial for the officials themselves as for the places of exile and the people there. Some examples of what these men did have already been cited. Moreover, since officials appointed to distant posts did not express such bitterness at the prospect of travel, we may imply that the laments raised by the banished officials had their roots in the misfortunes of demotion and loss of favor, matters remotely related to travel. So far as experiences are concerned, it is immaterial whether the officials' hearts were light or heavy when they embarked on their journey. The important thing is that they travelled, that they did not deliberately shut their eyes on the journey but gained the beneficial experiences of being in constant contact with nature and people.

The number of officials on the road should not obliterate from our minds a thin stream of travellers who sought the mountains in order to be away from man. The popular love of nature among latter-day scholars in China might not be the love of wild nature, but since ancient times (by which we mean the Warring States period), the places where recluses chose to live were certainly in the wilderness. Chuang Tzu said: "Making towards the marshes and living a quiet and retired life, such are scholars of the rivers and seas. [They] shun the world and love leisure." During the Han dynasty, one of the scholars at the court of Prince Huai-nan (Liu An, 179-122 B.C.) wrote a poem entitled "Summons to a Recluse" describing forbidding cliffs and wild beasts and concluded that such a place was not fit for him to stay. This could be taken as proof of the horror with which the Chinese at that time regarded nature in its unrefined state, but we must remember that the poem intentionally exaggerates the rigors of wild nature in order to persuade the recluse to return to
civilization. Moreover, this poem also shows that there actually were people who chose to live in the wilderness. Disorder in the interval between the Ch'in and Han dynasties caused many people to flee to rugged mountains in distant places.

What were other purposes in seeking nature in its wild state, especially in the mountains? If we confine our inquiry to those who travelled for the sake of seeing nature's sights and to those who left records about their travels, we may go back as early as the Chin dynasty. The great monk Hui-yuan (334-417) and other monks climbed the dangerous spot called Stone Gate on Lu Shan. This group left a significant piece on the appreciation of nature. Later, the great poet, T'ao Ch'ien (365-427), lived at the foot of Lu Shan and wrote poetry there. Although he was a lover of nature, he did not travel far and wide to discover mountains and crags. Hsieh Ling-yun, whose exploits have been described earlier, did seek out spectacular scenery and wrote poems to celebrate his discoveries.

From that time on, travel for the sake of seeing nature gradually became so common that names are too numerous to mention. During the T'ang dynasty, Li Po (699-762) stands out as one who travelled to meet people and visit great mountains. "All my life I have loved to roam on the famous mountains," he wrote, and he did. Although there is a certain amount of truth in the argument that Li Po travelled and stayed in the mountains for Taoist training, it is also true that he had an inner urge to free his spirit and mingle with the vast spirit of nature.

The second point, the Chinese preference for natural sights with a historical background, involves more subtle problems. This preference indicates a distaste for what is usually called unspoiled nature, and hence implies a limited capacity for the enjoyment of nature in its totality. This observation is to a great extent true, and to some modern men who chose to live in the wildest parts of the world, the Chinese love of nature may not only
seem trivial but almost artificial. This peculiar Chinese view of nature is deeply grounded in the Chinese way of life and thought. An analysis of it would be extremely complex, so consideration of a few significant points will have to suffice.

From the earliest authenticated records, such as certain sections of the Shu Ching (Book of History) and the Shih Ching (Book of Poetry), it can be seen that the Chinese people have been deeply conscious of history in matters of government and daily life. As the past was never gone, men grew up in its shadow.

A few examples will suffice to show that the past was invariably interpreted as being revealed in the present and that men were conscious of how the present would appear once it became the past. Consider the role of ancestor worship in daily life, or the section entitled "Sung" 頌 in the Shih Ching which consists of songs used in the kings' ancestral temples during worship ceremonies. Or take the regulations and detailed instructions for different ceremonies in the Li (Ceremonials and Rituals), or read the numerous speeches of diplomats and ministers in the Tso Chuan (Tso Commentary) which continually recall the past.

Indeed, the Chinese preoccupation with historical associations in nature is merely part of this total preoccupation with the past, and there exists the feeling that the attractiveness of natural sights is enhanced by connections with history.

In terminology, there is no equivalent in ancient Chinese writings for the English word "nature." T'ien 天, meaning sky or heaven, was the earliest in use to signify the primary force of the universe which gives life to all things. Confucius is reported to have said in his Lun Yu: "Heaven does not speak; yet the four seasons run their course thereby, the hundred creatures, each after its kind, are born thereby." 12

Later, t'ien 天 was coupled with the word ti 地, meaning earth, and the two terms together came to mean the universe. As a
polarity, t'ien was understood as force and ti as matter. Thus, in Wen-yen, one of the ten appendices of the I Ching (Book of Changes), heaven is characterized as strong and ceaselessly strengthening itself while the earth is described as gentle and bearing up all things by its rich virtue. The concept of heaven as the perpetually moving force and the earth as the passive, materialistic receptacle was generally accepted, and the combination of the two words reveals the way it was accepted - that the two, the creative force and the created objects, are inseparable.

There was also the term yu-chou, meaning not only the universe, but time as well, because yu was interpreted as "the above and below and the four directions" and chou as "the past, present, and future." The characteristic of time is its ever new quality, and what is manifest on the ceaselessly rolling waves of time are the phenomena of the universe. Time, as it is said in the Chuang Tzu, cannot be stopped, and the life of things follows its flow. The T'uan Chuan (T'uan Commentary) on the feng hexagram says: "When the sun stands at midday, it begins to set; when the moon is full, it begins to wane. The fullness and emptiness of heaven and earth wane and wax in the course of time. How much more true is this of men, or of spirits and gods!" Understanding these terms helps one to understand the Chinese view of nature.

An outlook on life and the universe built on fundamental concepts such as these neither rejects the world of nature as entirely illusory nor considers it as entirely materialistic. Nature is real because it is being, but since being comes from non-being, there is the element of non-being in being. And both follow the course of time, the all-compelling principle. The importance given to the concept of time was carried into political rule. It is said in the Li Chi (Record of Rituals):

Thus it was that when the sages would make rules [for men], they felt it necessary to
find the origin [of all things] in heaven and earth; to make the two forces [of nature] the commencement [of all]; to use the four seasons as the handle [of their arrangements].

Further, since the four seasons rotate and life runs in cycles of death and birth, time, which is conceived of as curling around the universe of things, makes a spiral rather than a straight forward movement. Lao Tzu 老子 stressed the return of everything. In the I Ching, the 褪 (return) hexagram says: "On the seventh day comes return. This is the course of heaven," and "In the hexagram of Return one sees the mind of heaven and earth."

Nurtured in an environment in which the historical past was ever vividly present and in a philosophical outlook in which the world and men were integrated with the basic forces of nature and had their existence as the content of time, it is natural that the Chinese should be prone to find places with historical interest more meaningful and transcendentally enjoyable.

In daily life, time needs the alternation of night and day and the change of seasons to make itself felt. For example, one who lives in an even climate can lose a clear sense of time owing to the lack of distinctive seasons and may get the uncomfortable feeling that the passage of his life has been one indistinguishable lump of time. The relationships between man and unspoiled nature and between man and nature with historical connotations is analogous to this. Nature in her virgin state may be to human understanding an unintelligible slumbering mass of matter, awakened only when seen by man. But when human toil takes place on nature's soil, ties are established to unite man and nature. The pleasure a viewer gains from the invasion of nature by human activities is not only a perspective of historical activities but an appreciation and insight into the senses hidden in nature. The pleasure received from natural sights with historical significance is chiefly meditative and philosophical whether it be a desolate wilderness where the grave of the tragic Han court beauty Chao-chun
lies or an extremely impressive scenic spot like the Red Cliff where Ts'ao Ts'ao (155-220) suffered his crushing defeat in 208.

The preference for natural sights with historical connotations represents, after all, only one aspect of the Chinese love of nature. It should not be allowed to detract us from the most common form of love of nature which was manifested in the search for impressive scenery. The peculiar characteristics of China's natural scenery formed the taste of those who were most familiar with them. The famous mountains in China Proper do not rise to tremendous heights when compared to the high peaks on her borders and beyond, but they excel in sensational scenery. Overhanging precipices, weirdly shaped peaks, aged pines more fantastically twisted than any contrived by a gardener's hand, waterfalls ranging from the most haunting in grandeur to the most ethereal in beauty—these are the sights that inspired poets and painters alike.

A new appreciative understanding of nature began in the Eastern Chin period. Hui-yuan's master Tao-an 道安 (312-385), the renowned monk, always chose to live on a mountain. Yu Fa-lan 玉法蘭 (fl. early fourth century), another brilliant monk, showed a great love of nature. While in Ch'ang-an, he made his retreat on the surrounding hills, but hearing of the beautiful scenery of eastern Chekiang, he went there on foot and lived on Shih-cheng Shan 石城山.

Tracing the development of the poetic trends in Wen-hsin tiao lung 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons), Liu Hsieh 劉勰 (465?-522?) wrote: "At the beginning of Sung (420-479), some development in the literary trend was evident. Chuang and Lao had receded into the background and the theme of mountains and streams then began to flourish."16 As a matter of fact, the monk Hui-yuan and the poets T'ao Ch'ien and Hsieh Ling-yün had already chosen nature as their themes a little
earlier than the time indicated by Liu Hsieh.

This new interest in and attitude toward nature was due to two factors: the influence of a philosophy combining Taoist thought with Buddhist ideas and the migration of the gentry to the warmer and more attractive South early in the fourth century when the Eastern Chin dynasty established its capital in present-day Nanking. For many philosophically minded men, a sensuous delight in nature was fused with a realization that the visible was an embodiment of the Tao (the Way) in which the whole universe, including man, had its being. For them, a towering mountain was admired less for its physical height than for the ethereal nature of its mist-wrapped summit leading their thoughts to the unfathomable. Nature thus became an object of endlessly joyful and quiet contemplation. The examples set by Buddhist monks, the great corpus of nature poetry, and the many landscape paintings since that time have taught the Chinese people how to appreciate nature.