"Why does the virtuous man take delight in landscapes?" asked the Sung painter Kuo Hsi. He gave several reasons, the chief of which was that the conscientious scholar, tied to his desk, immersed in the world and its troubles, finds in the contemplation of a landscape painting a refreshment of mind and heart as compelling as though he were to wander among the mountains themselves.

The Chinese landscape painter who in his pictures satisfies this longing depicts not merely the outward and visible forms of nature, but the inner life and harmony that pervade them. The picture is, therefore, in a sense symbolic—not in the way in which a European classical landscape is symbolic, for poetic and mythological allusion play little part in it, but symbolic in a wider and vaguer sense. For Chinese landscape painting embodies a total view of life, expressed in the language of rocks and trees, mountains and water.

This book is an attempt to discover the sources of this symbolic language, and to trace its early development. I hope that in due course it will be followed by further studies of Chinese landscape painting in its maturity.

A glance at the table of contents will suggest that the subject has been handled in a somewhat piecemeal fashion. But I have resisted the temptation to force it into a smooth, well-rounded shape, feeling that, with the evidence so scattered and fragmentary, it is better to allow the form of each chapter to be dictated by the material at hand. Partially to remedy this situation, however, I have included at the end a brief summary, which the general reader might be advised to glance through before plunging into the book itself.

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