

Plate 71 DIGGING A WELL ON THE PLATEAU, by Li Keh-min.

Peasant Paintings from Hu-hsien

THE PEASANTS of Hu-hsien 戶縣, a model commune in Shensi near the ancient city of Sian 西安, have recently attracted much attention through their spare-time artistic efforts performed in the past two decades. At home, professional painters from Peking are travelling to Hu-hsien to learn from them, and abroad they have been exhibited in Paris and consequently aroused considerable discussion by historians of Chinese art as well as observers of modern China. Reactions from the outside world range from patronising praise to mildly denigration reflecting perhaps some uncertainty in the judgement of the critics.

Scepticism has been expressed on the spontaneity of the Hu-hsien paintings and the amateur states of the painters. There has been much speculation on how these paintings have been derived in the first place.

Uncertainty and scepticism perhaps are the results of excessive attention on the political content of the paintings. To be sure, the message of these paintings is plain, but the purely artistic roots are perhaps not too difficult to discern. First, there are the bold use of basic colours, the crowded effect and the schematised designs, all characteristic of the wholly or partially wood-block printed new year pic-

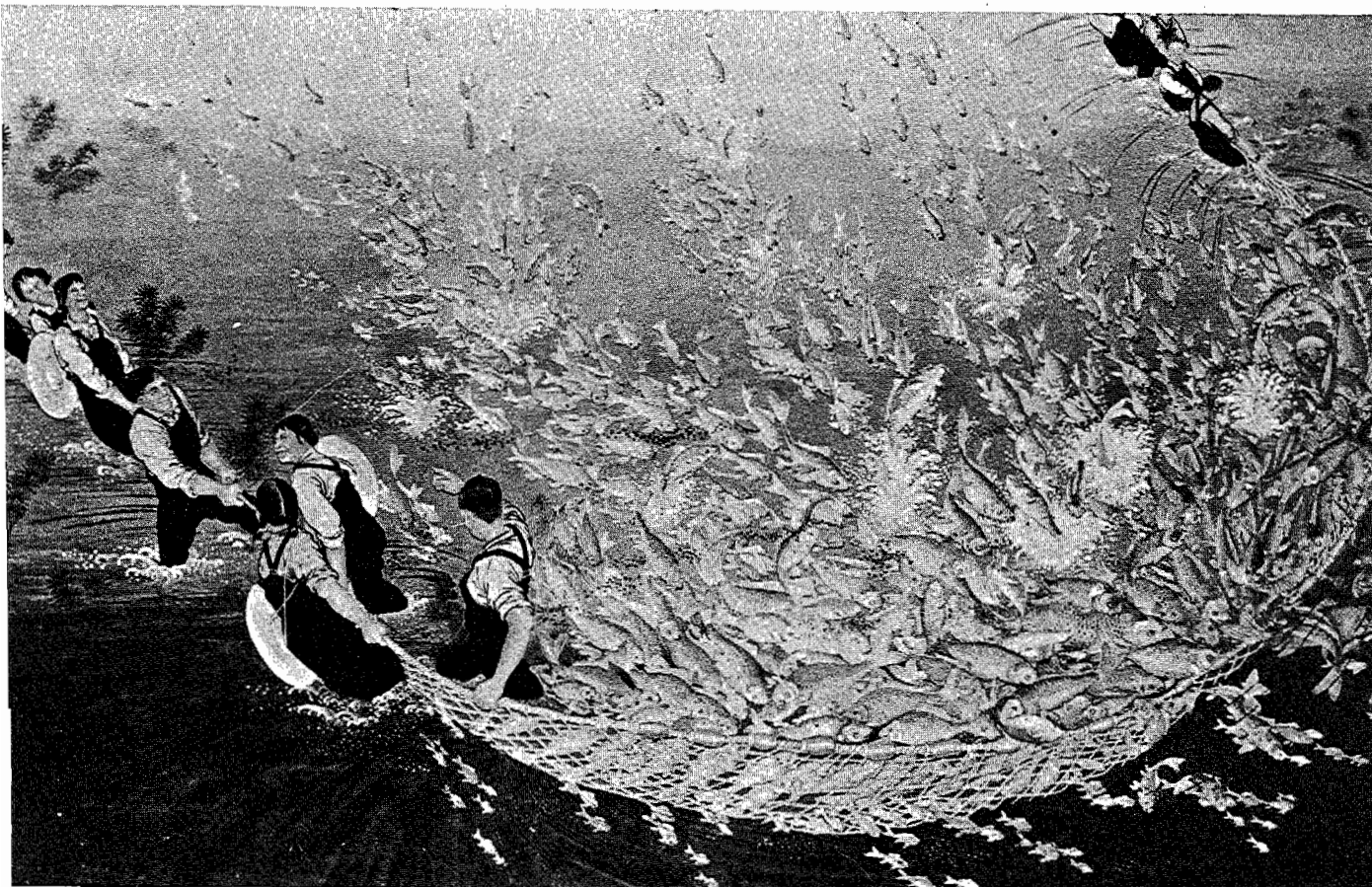


Plate 72 COMMUNE FISH POND, by Tung Cheng-yi.

tures (*nien hua* 年畫), popular throughout the Ch'ing period. Indeed the Hu-hsien paintings lend themselves very well to reproduction by wood-block printing—and to adaptation in paper-cut, another popular art form in China. Secondly, there is the most striking use of traditional perspective emphasizing a feeling of distance rather than an illusion of three dimensional space. Then there is the actual mechanics of the creative process in which the picture is composed by juxtaposing standardised elements most of which are to be found in handbooks of drawing which are as readily available in China today as the *Shih-chu-chai* 十竹齋 and *Chieh-tzu-yuan* 芥子園 were in the late Ming and early Ch'ing periods. This last observation is by no means a criticism of the creativeness of the peasant painters of Hu-hsien. A summary comparison between the Hu-hsien paintings and those by the members of another model commune, Hsi-yang Hsien 昔陽縣 in Shansi Province, will convince any observer of the artistic superiority of Hu-hsien. The paintings of Hu-hsien are just as valid as art form as the wood-block prints and the decorative arts of the





Plate 73 NEVER STOP BEING INDUSTRIOUS AND THRIFTY, by Chang Lin.

late Ming and early Ch'ing—which was perhaps the greatest period in the history of “folk art” in China. In common with the best wood-block artists of the 17th century, such as Chen Hung-shou and Hsiao Yün-ch'ung, the peasant painters of Hu-hsien combine boldness and originality (in the form of the unexpected) with extreme stylisation. In this way, Hu-hsien paintings may be regarded as a true renaissance of the art of the Chinese people.

J.W.

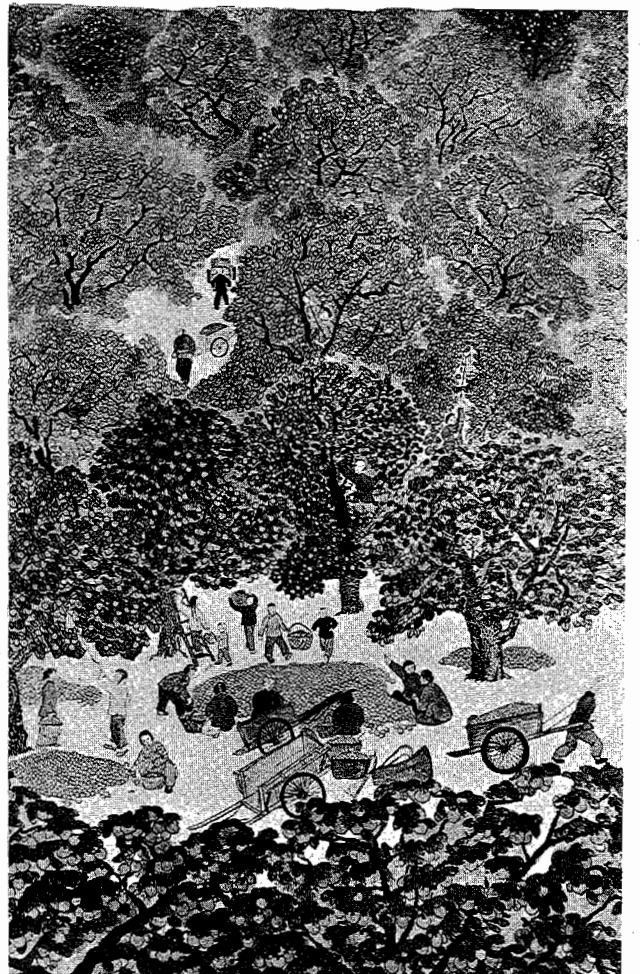


Plate 74
COMMUNE PERSIMMON GROVE,
by Wen Chih-chiang.

Plate 75 (top): Children outside a house with wall-paintings, a common sight in this commune. Hu-hsien, 1976.

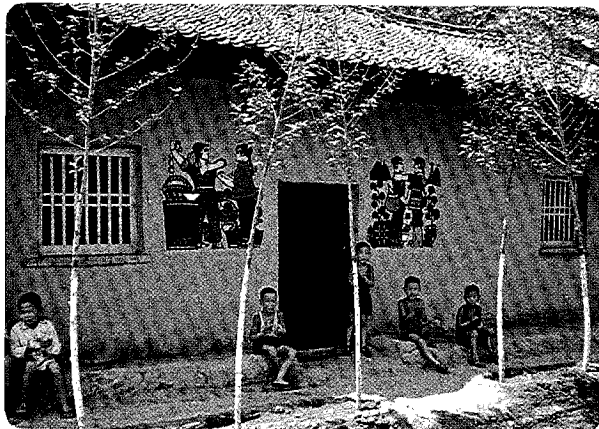


Plate 76 (below): GATHERING THE COMMUNE'S LOTUS-ROOTS, by Tu Chien-jung.

