

THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

By HEDDA HAMMER

While looking for illustrations to the article on landscape painting in our February issue, we found in the Peking studio of Hedda Hammer a magnificent series of photographs of the Hua Shan, the Sacred Mountain. Some of them are reproduced in this issue. Beautiful as they are by themselves, our readers will appreciate Miss Hammer's accompanying article which adds to the pictures the two dimensions of history and travelogue.

The photographer-author, a daughter of the city of Stuttgart in southwestern Germany, has made Peking her home for a number of years and ranks today among the finest photographers of Chinese subjects.—K. M.

CHINA is renowned for her many sacred mountains, held in veneration by either Buddhists or Taoists, and among the finest and most interesting of them is the Hua Shan in southern Shensi, not far from where the Honan and Shansi borders meet. It forms an outlying spur of the Tsin-ling Range, which is again a continuation of the distant Kuen-lun, and lies a little to the south of where the Wei River joins the Yellow River. Geologically the Hua Shan is of doubtful affinities since the region has not to my knowledge been properly surveyed by a competent geologist. It would be interesting to know the exact process which formed the magnificent cliffs and jagged scenery famed throughout China for thousands of years. The Hua Shan consists of an isolated spur, separated in the south by tremendous precipices from the main range of the Tsin-ling and culminating in a magnificent massif topped by five peaks. The whole covers an area of about nine square miles.

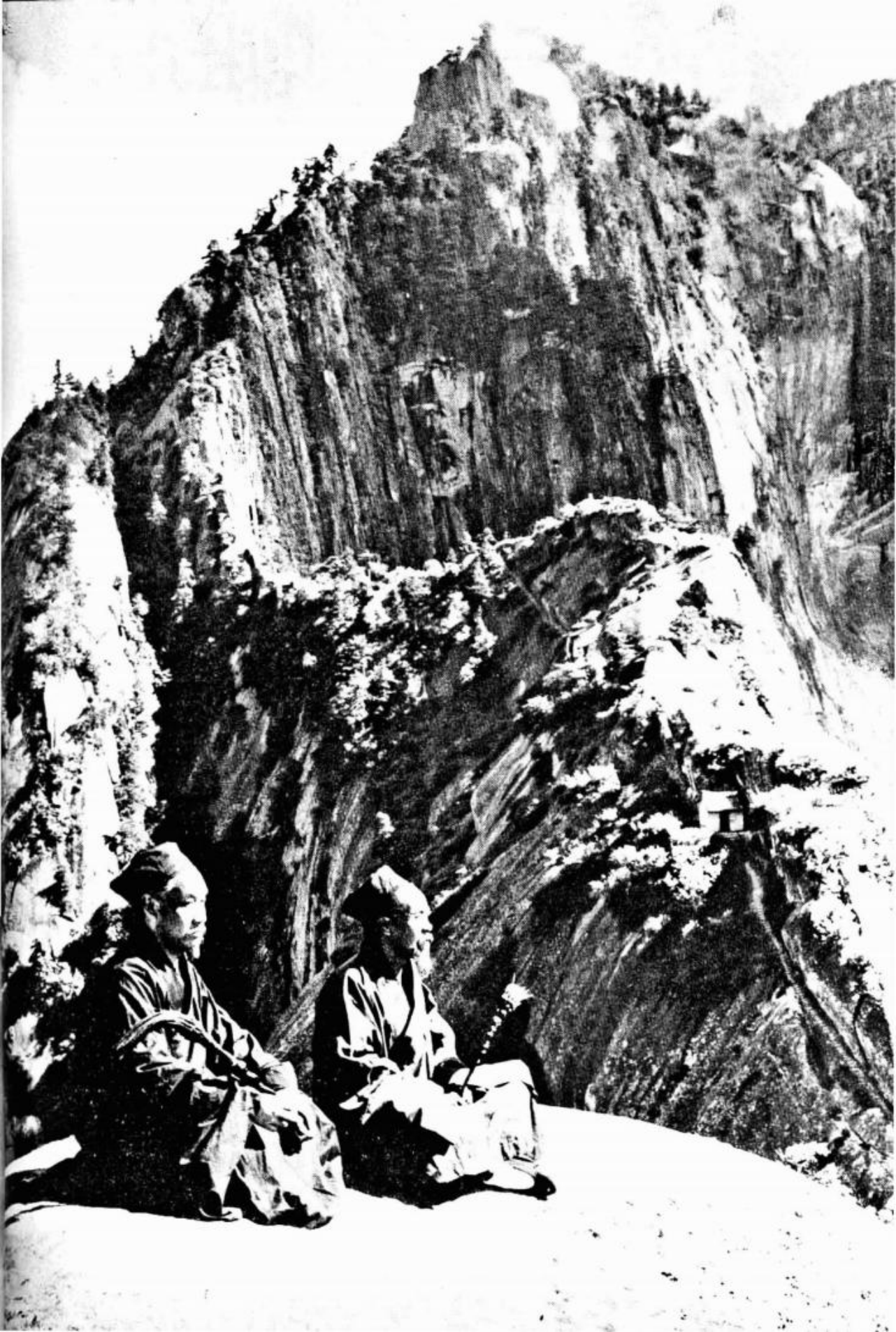
AGE-OLD VENERATION

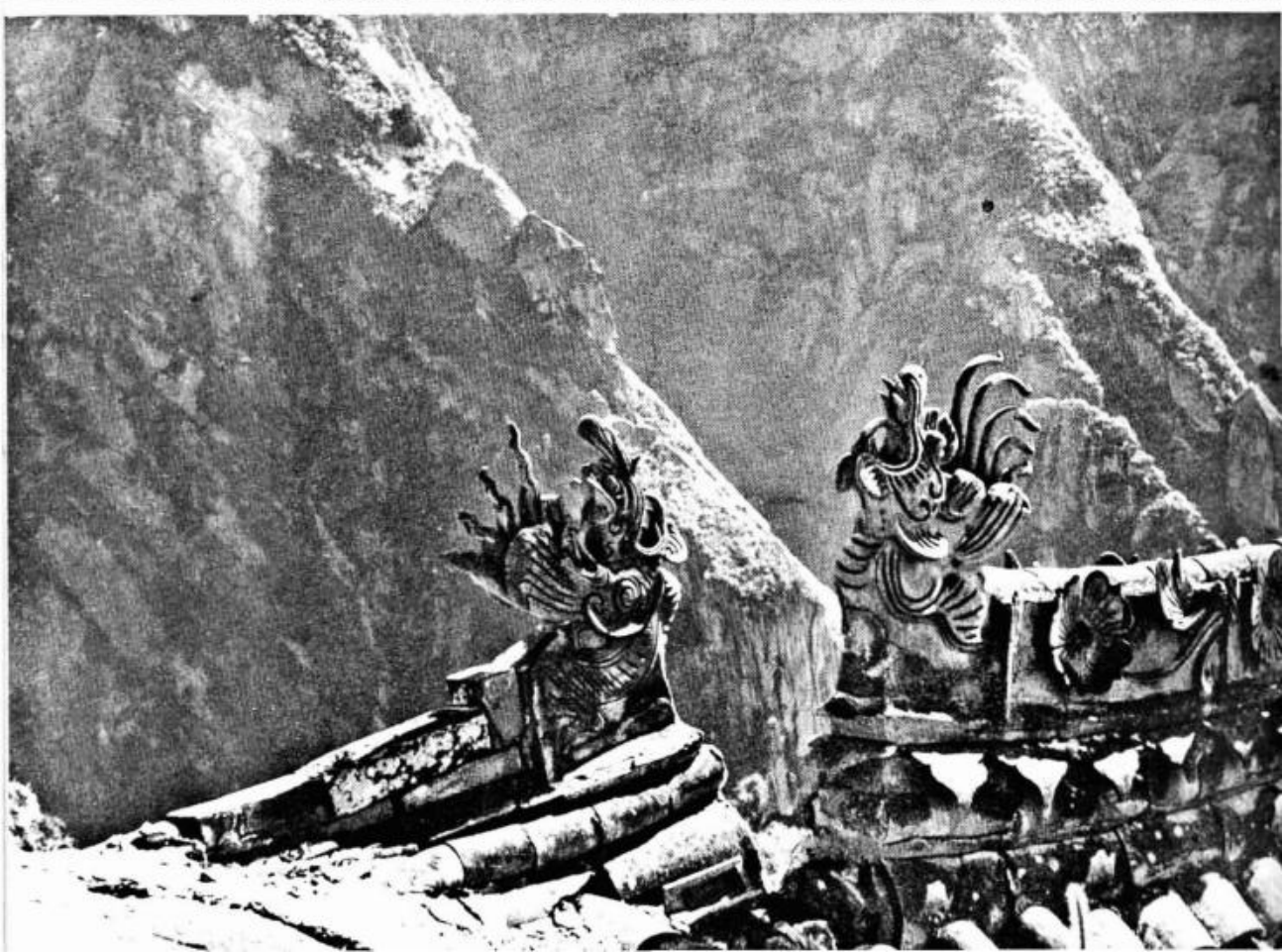
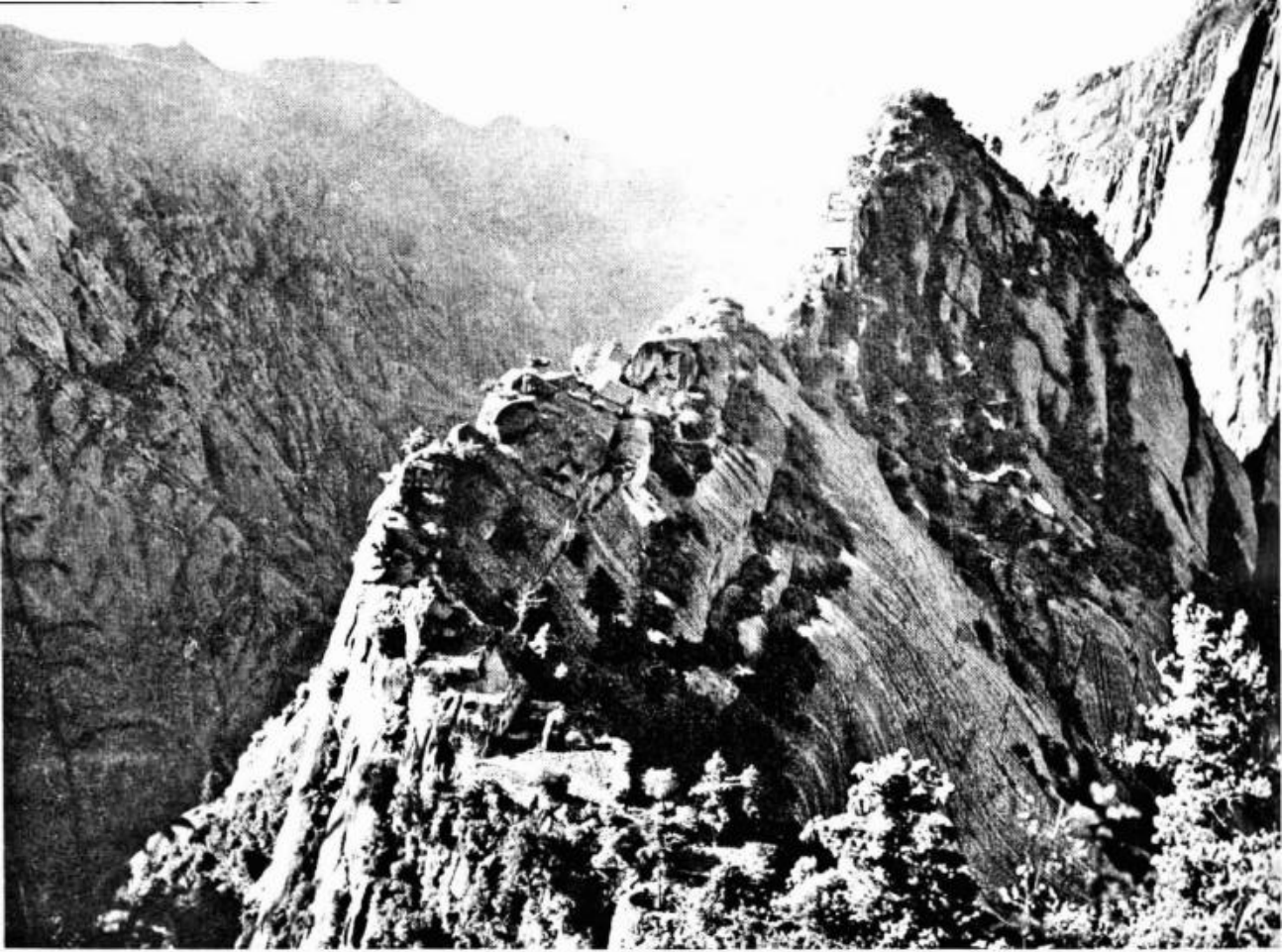
We find the first mention of the Hua Shan in the *Shu King*, the Book of Records, which was compiled in legendary times. It contains a semi-mythical account of how the Emperor Shun (about 2250 B. C.) visited the mountain to offer sacrifices to the local god, the tutelary deity of metals, birds, and all quadrupeds. Even at that

early date there were four sacred mountains in China, the other three being the Tai Shan in Shantung, the Heng Shan in Honan, and another mountain of the same name in Hopei. Later, with the coming of Taoism and Buddhism, the older centers of primitive nature-



worship were taken over by the new religions, and so Hua Shan became Taoist and is one of the nine sacred mountains existing in China today. Pilgrims come to it throughout the year from all parts of China. Their numbers are especially great in the late spring, and among them there is always a large percentage of Taoist priests.



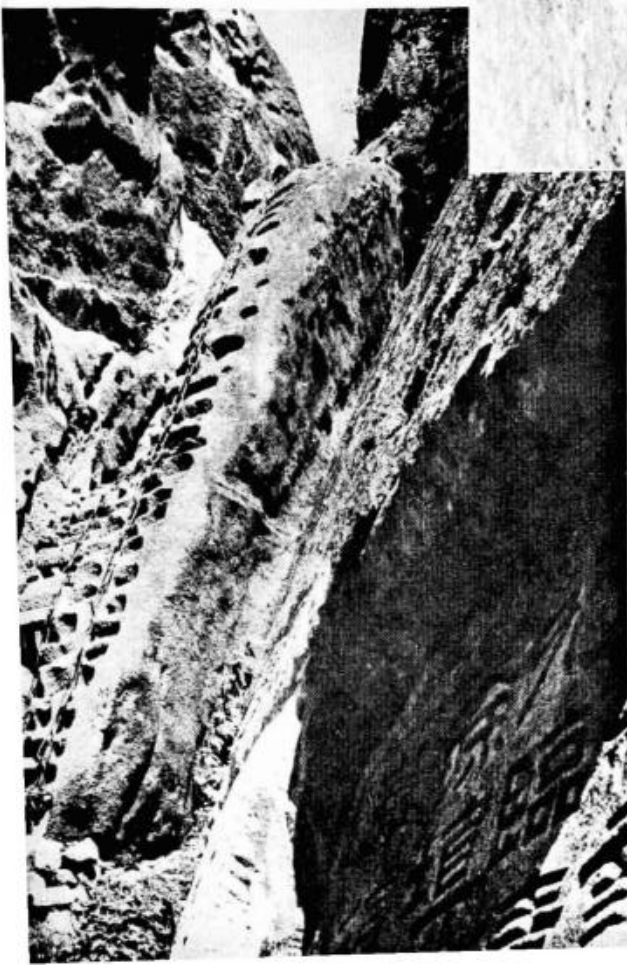
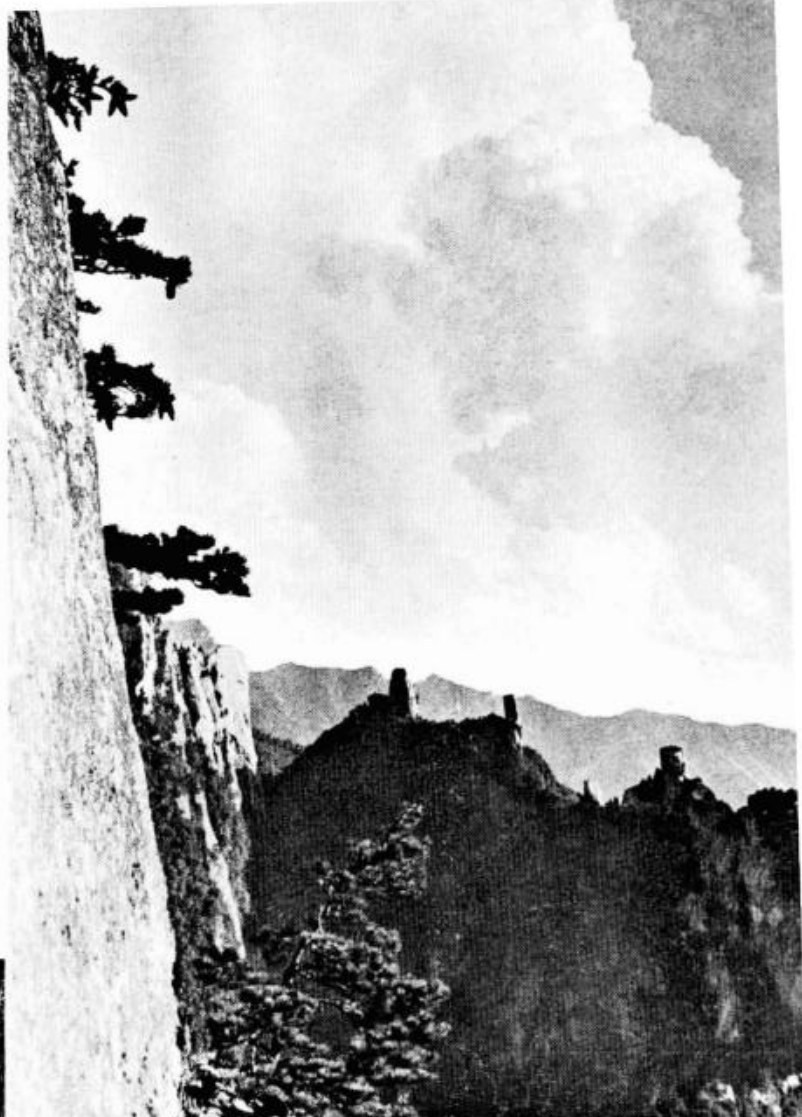


Ridge of the North Peak
seen from Hsi Feng (the
West Peak)

(below) Flamboyantly
ornamented temple eaves
clinging like swallows'
nests to the rock

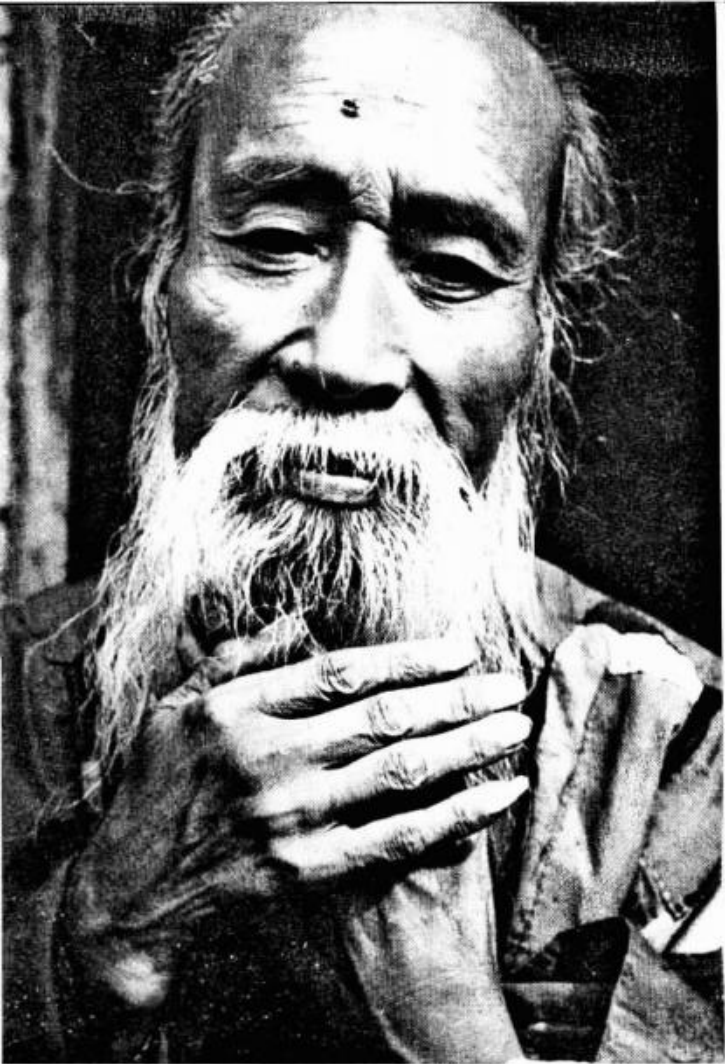


Castle-like rock formations
on the southern massif



Hua Shan, the sacred mountain of Shensi

A precarious ascent. The chains are in
none too good a state of preservation.
Inscriptions are carved on the rock wall
at the right



A Sacred Place of Taoism

A hermit of the Hua Shan.
He is too remote from the
little annoyances of daily
life to be troubled by them

"Darkly brooding grows the cypress
Where the Kwan-yin temple lies.
I come from far with weary travel
A suppliant at the Goddess' home,
Praying for her gentle mercy
That my love may never fail."

A goddess of the
Hua Shan





"The air is his food: the clouds are his home.

He travels on the wind while the full moon lights his path.

Wealth and honor, all worldly things
His spirit has put away."

A young Taoist monk



An ancient sacred dance performed by Taoist priests. The traditional costumes consist of brilliant orange gowns, black hats and shoes, and white stockings



The West Peak precipice

The Hua Shan in clouds and sunlight

A pavilion, now inaccessible,
as the path leading to it has
been entirely worn away



space, and the twelve clean winds are here;
And with them broods eternity—a swift,
white peace, a presence manifest.
The rhythm ceases here. Time has no place.
This is the end that has no end."

The summit of Hsi Feng
looming through the mist







"Kawanaka-shima Kassen" (Battle of Kawanaka-shima)



"Kawanaka-shima Kassen": prayer scene before the battle

MOVIES of JAPAN



"Genroku-Chushingura"
(The Forty-Seven Ronins)



"Yedo-Saigonohi" (The Last Days of Yedo)



"Jiro-Monogatari" (The Story of Jiro)



"Otoko-no-Hanamichi"

ONE'S COMPANY

Apart from hearing that wonderful mountain scenery was to be found there, I knew little about conditions when I set out for the Hua Shan. I traveled lightly, with only a rucksack for luggage containing mainly cameras and climbing shoes. I left the train at the little station of Hua Yin Hsien which we had reached in the evening, hours late. There were not many passengers, and when the train quickly moved on I was left standing rather forlornly staring up at the mountains. A slight feeling of nervousness overcame me, for I had set out without much preparation. I knew nothing of the distances to be covered or the conditions and people I should encounter. To the south the peaks of Hua Shan still caught the evening sunlight against a background of red clouds, while mist was beginning to cover the lower slopes, already enshrouded in twilight.

After a few preliminary difficulties owing to my lack of acquaintance with the local dialect, I was told that the Jade Spring monastery lay near by and that accommodation was provided for pilgrims. It was a charming place, and I was most hospitably received by the monks. The monastery lay on the banks of a pool whose cool mountain water was ideal for a bathe. The accommodation was of the type generally found in such places—a *k'ang* or mud platform to sleep on, and bedding if one needed it. The *k'ang*, although rather hard, makes an excellent bed, and since it can be heated from underneath it is very agreeable in cold weather. Delicious vegetarian food was also to be had at the monastery.

THE FLYING CONCUBINE

In the morning the priests provided me with a coolie to carry my rucksack and guide me up the mountain. We left at dawn, following the course of the stream which was in spate after heavy rain and had frequently to be crossed. The way was rocky, with the bed of the stream filled with huge boulders. Wherever I looked, there was a profusion of alpine flowers, and gaunt

and gnarled pine trees grew up to the topmost heights. At distances of an hour's walk stood small temples with no other attendants than solitary priests and acolytes. They politely offered us tea for refreshment.

In one of these temples stood a statue of Mao-Nu, and on the wall was inscribed her two-thousand-year-old history. Mao-Nu was a concubine of the powerful Emperor Shih Huang-ti, the builder of the Great Wall. At his death it was decreed that she, together with the rest of the Emperor's household, should be buried alive at his funeral in order to accompany him to the next world. She fled to the Hua Shan where she lived the life of a hermit, living on the seeds of the pine trees and drinking the morning dew. She was revered as a saint on account of her knowledge and wisdom and the help she freely gave to poor people. In her old age, so legend has it, she became like a bird and learnt the art of flying.

ASCENT

About midday we reached the actual foot of the Hua Shan massif. The inevitable priest materialized to ask the inevitable questions—my home, age, nationality, and the number of my children. Having replied suitably, I stared up at the mountain which confronted us. From every side save that whence we had come, we were almost entirely shut in by sheer rock walls. For three hours we climbed up two narrow crevices over gigantic steps cut at two-foot intervals in the rock. In some places iron chains had been placed so as to help the climber, but they were often in bad condition owing to age and neglect. We had continually to call out to warn anyone descending from above to wait in a place where it would be possible to pass each other. Suddenly, as so often happens, we reached the end of the ascent and emerged onto a narrow ridge flanked by precipices, which led to the Pei Feng or Temple of the North Peak.

So narrow was the ridge that the path had to pass through the temple

itself, there being no room on either side. From this point a superb view presented itself. The range of the Tsin-ling could be seen for miles where it abutted on the Yellow River plain. To the northeast lay the confluence of the Wei with the Yellow River. At our feet were Hua Yin Hsien and the route up which we had come, every detail clearly visible in the pure mountain air.

To the south stood the other peaks of Hua Shan, and our attention automatically centered on the awe-inspiring sweep of the West Peak, culminating in a sheer precipice hundreds of feet deep. Finally towards the west there sprawled the broad, empty valley of the Wei, bordered to the south by the Tsin-ling escarpment. Although the highest points of the Hua Shan reach six thousand feet, there is no lack of vegetation. The trees are mainly pines, so appropriate in a Chinese landscape; and there is plenty of undergrowth and flowering alpine plants.

ART AND REALITY

A feature of the Hua Shan are the countless inscriptions cut in the rock, praising the beauty of the scenery. A rough translation of a typical one runs like this: "The mountain lies before us, secrets surround us. A few steps more, and we pause. The peaks are hidden in clouds and mist steals up from the plain to cloak the ascent. The morning sun slowly rises to chase the mist away and the last remnants are wind-borne from our sight. Then at last can we admire the full splendor of rock and peak and jagged precipice, more like the creation of some noble artist than reality."

The Pei Feng temple was inhabited by five Taoist priests and a sickly boy with his teacher. The boy was from Shanghai, where doctors had prescribed mountain air for his delicate health. Every day he took his lessons in painting and calligraphy under conditions which, at least theoretically, were absolutely ideal for artistic development. In front of the main altar hung

many small pieces of embroidery work given to the temple by women out of gratitude for the fulfillment of their prayers.

A GREAT DECISION

The North Peak happens to be the lowest in the Hua Shan, and from it there runs a path along another razor-edged ridge to the West Peak. The going is difficult and in some places so dangerous that railings have been erected for the better protection of visitors. But these railings were in poor repair and so rotten that they were more of a menace than anything else. The route is further complicated in one place by a short but perpendicular ascent known as the Sky Ladder.

It was probably at this very spot that Han Yu, perhaps the greatest of all Tang dynasty writers, met with difficulties which we can still easily imagine today. Together with some friends, he had made a pilgrimage to the Hua Shan and successfully scaled all five peaks. But when the time came for the descent he was overcome by fear and, rather than face the return journey, announced his decision to remain on the mountain for the rest of his life. His friends, however, secured his return by a ruse. Persuading the great man that this momentous decision should be suitably celebrated, they saw to it that in the ensuing festivities the poet became entirely insensible. He did not recover consciousness until he had been successfully lowered to the foot of the mountain in a basket.

On our way we came across a small temple from which a particularly striking view was obtainable of the precipice of the West Peak, which is so sheer that it almost looks like an overhang. The temple houses two rather peasant-like goddesses, and on the wall is a poem:

"Darkly brooding grows the cypress
Where the Kwan-yin temple lies.
I come from far with weary travel
A suppliant at the Goddess' home,
Praying for her gentle mercy
That my love may never fail."

CLOUDS AND A PILGRIM

When we came out again from the temple, a remarkable change had taken place in the scene. The bright summer sunlight and the white clouds floating through the blue sky had given way to a mountainous bank of mist which had suddenly enveloped the place on which we stood. At times we could not see anything, and then, in the eddies of the mist, lone pine trees would suddenly loom up, strange and menacing in the half light. Sometimes the mist would clear and we saw West Peak, swathed and wrapped in the same white vapor. The singular beauty of the clouds as they swirled around us was something never to be forgotten, and I was kept busy trying to capture some of this beauty with my camera.

From here it was not far to Hsi Feng, the actual temple of the West Peak. We walked along an easy path under pine trees smelling fragrantly in the damp, and when we arrived at the temple the mist disappeared as quickly as it had come.

The evening meal was just being served, and room was quickly made for my coolie and myself. All the guests eat together, and the food is vegetarian, often made up with much skill to resemble various kinds of fish and meat. Indeed, it was impossible to tell that some dishes consisted only of vegetables. A very friendly atmosphere prevailed, and, by that obscure system so typical of China, nearly everything about me was known before my arrival. As a foreigner I was naturally the center of much interest.

To my great surprise I knew one of the other guests, and his surprise was almost as great as my own. He was one of the priests of the White Cloud Temple in Peking, and I had met him there while photographing. He was on a pilgrimage to the Hua Shan, and he had reached it on foot via Taiyuanfu and Tungkuan, a very creditable piece of walking.

IN PRAISE OF THE HERMIT

The night was bitterly cold, but in the morning the sun was shining again.

I spent the morning exploring the temple and idly watching fairy-like processions of small clouds which floated up slowly from the plain beneath and away to the distant mountains. I left after the midday meal, having made an appropriate gift to the temple in return for the hospitality which I had received.

Now we made for the southern part of the massif, where great precipices drop away to the lower slopes of the Tsin-ling Shan. Characteristic of the region are the many curiously shaped, precipitous buttes which, in the distance, look like medieval castles perched on their commanding heights.

The Nan Feng, or South Peak, is not really a peak at all but a sheltered hollow supporting a considerable growth of pine trees. This was probably the spot to which, in very early days, the first hermits came to live on the Hua Shan. Now the largest temples, the gifts of wealthy pilgrims, are to be found on the South Peak.

Another easy path leads on from here to the Tung Feng, or East Peak, where I witnessed an ancient Taoist dance in a magnificent mountain setting. The priests went through their formal figures on a flat, smooth-topped rock, while distant thunder clouds made a backdrop for their traditional costumes of brilliant orange gowns, pure white stockings, and black shoes and hats.

I had little time left. The way led back to the Pei Feng, where, after a last wonderful meal, I sat with the rest of the company out on the terrace. We watched a full moon rise over the mountains, throwing the great Hsi Feng precipice into bold relief. With so much beauty there was no room for sadness. My mind went back to a little poem about a **hermit**, inscribed on a rock of the Nan Feng:

"The air is his food: the clouds are his home.

He travels on the wind while the full moon lights his path.

Wealth and honor, all worldly things
His spirit has put away."