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IMMORTAL CREATIONS

An Introduction to Li Keran's
Freehand Figures and Buffaloes

Sun Meilan

Li Keran, the world-renowned master of modern Chinese landscape painting, cultivated in the artistic garden for 70 years. His talents and attainments crystallized in the realm of landscape painting, with his free sketched figures and buffaloes equally creative and outstanding.

The monumental, solemn, and poised features of Li Keran's landscapes in which thousands of brush strokes do not seem abundant stand in striking contrast with the lucid, transcendental, and revealing character of his figures and buffaloes in which one or two strokes do not appear less than sufficient. His 'complexities' of the former category can well be compared with those of Wang Meng and Huang Binhong, whereas his 'simplicities' of the latter group well match those of Liang Kai and Qi Baishi.

Landscape painting was the first kind of paintings Li began to learn as a child. His graduation work from Shanghai Private School of Fine Arts at the age of 18 was also a large scale landscape which bore the annotations of Liu Haisu, the then school master. There is ample evidence, therefore, that landscape paintings dominated Li's earlier creations followed by free-hand figures. In the subsequent 10 years, however, Li began to learn oil painting and exerted much effort in producing anti-japanese propaganda drawings. He returned to traditional Chinese painting when he was 35. Li described his career in the 1940's as being "dominated by landscapes, with occasional classical figures, buffaloes, and legends". Nevertheless, critics of the time mostly viewed Li's success as in, above all, freehand figures, accompanied by landscapes and buffaloes. During the 1950's, Li's determination to break through the tradition was also realized through his landscape paintings, entailed by buffaloes and figures. Thus, from landscapes and figures to figures, landscapes, and buffaloes and later to landscapes, buffaloes, and figures, Li Keran had so far gone through a spiral development in his efforts to explore and refine the Chinese painting tradition. The later "cultural revolution" barely fin-

ished him, and yet it did not stop him from carrying on his calligraphy practice in which he excelled consequently and formed his own style. Li Keran's unique artistic system of landscapes, figures, buffaloes, and calligraphy can thus far be said to have matured and developed into a self-sufficient and integral stage characterized by its creative vitality and originality.

Most critics today are focusing on Li's landscape paintings. Very few systematic studies on the artist's figures and buffaloes, though well praised, have been found, which could be due to the overwhelming fame of Li's landscapes. It is to this end that this introduction is aiming itself.

LI KERAN'S FREEHAND FIGURES

“Able to paint as a child,
Your gift is seldom seen.
There will be a day when you'll suddenly find
Me humbly admiring you.”

These, among other things, were the words in the annotations written on a landscape painting given to the 13-year-old Li Keran the year he began to learn painting from his earliest art teacher Qian Shizhi.

“Able to paint as a child” helps us track the beginning of Li's freehand figures. At the age of 7 after he was admitted to a private school, he fell in love with calligraphy and painting. He won quite a fame when, at the age of 9, he wrote two large Chinese characters “Chang Huai” (expressing my aspirations freely) after a well-known calligrapher Miao Juwu¹. Since then, the young calligrapher developed an habit of writing Spring Festival couplets for people as well as painting “Zhong Kui” (a legendary ghost-eater) at Dragon Boat Festivals to “exorcise evil spirits”. This habit of painting “Zhong Kui”, as we shall see later, lasted till the end of his life, creating a series of masterpieces.

Why is it that Li Keran began to paint “Zhong Kui” at such an early age? To answer this question, we have to understand Xuzhou, the place Li was born, otherwise a comprehensive understanding of Li's art, especially his figures and buffaloes, would seem unrealistic. A visit to Xuzhou, to his childhood neighbors, therefore, would help locate the origin and cultural bearing of Li's art.

Seven decades ago, the city of Xuzhou was situated along an abandoned course of the Yellow River. This replaced river course naturally became a

meeting place for ordinary people: Some set up stalls selling household supplies or clay toys; some performed Dagū, a form of story-telling accompanied by drums; some played juggling; and others sang operas. It was also a place for children to frolic around. Though little traces lingered long enough to attest young Keran's ability of kite-making and juggling, the boy's opera figures drawn on the ground with pieces of broken porcelain served as rudiments for his later freesketches. Reading "The excellence of Suzhou-appreciating new year pictures", a short essay written by Li Keran in the 1950's, you would be amazed by his talent in putting in a mere 300-word essay such a vivid and interesting description of the folk entertainments south of the Yangtze River, which could but due to his thorough understanding of and deep love for folk art as well as to his own experiences and expertise in local recreational activities.

As a historically strategic place to fight for, Xuzhou has also been a town of cultural significance. It was a place where various forms of folk art and traditional literati paintings converged. The tablet with the inscription of "Ode to the gale" by Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han Dynasty, has been preserved until today. Other famous places include the stone bed in which Su Dongpo, a great poet of the Song Dynasty, is said to have slept when drunk, and places like the "pleasant pavilion", the lotus pool, and the "Crane-riding pavilion" where Su wrote his poems and painted his pictures, as well as numerous ancient temples. All these culture-bearing historic sites must have left young Keran with memorable impressions, since, as a life-time patriot, he had always been in fervent love with the mountains and rivers of his native country as well as with the traditional culture. His long-lasting devotion to the development of national culture could well be attributed to the nurture and nourishment he received at Xuzhou.

Li Keran's father, Li Huichun, was the first one to inspire Keran's love for calligraphy and painting. Li Huichun was an illiterate peasant who fled to Xuzhou from a famine-stricken area. He lived on fishing for a while, and then learned to cook and opened a small restaurant. It was from him and his illiterate wife that Li Keran inherited the character of diligence, honesty, kindness, and generosity. Li Huichun was also a father with bags of stories ready at hand, which Li Keran mentioned repeatedly. For example, the story about the writing of Yan Men Guan (the Yanmen Pass) by an eccentric and well-accomplished calligrapher whose brush seemed to have a supernatural effect,

the story about Wang Xizhi, a renowned calligrapher, and his pet-geese, and the story about another distinguished calligrapher Huai Su practicing on banana-tree leaves and burying his used brushes all played a significant role in Keran's career, for they helped seed in the master's boyhood what he was always keen on: diligence and assiduousness. If we look at the themes, the spirit, and the styles of the representative images of each period of his artistic career, e. g. "The Inkstone-Washing Su Dongpo", "Wang Xizhi and His Geese", "Mi Fu Worships a Stone", "The Crane-Riding Pavilion", "Admiring Lotus Flowers", "Zhong Kui", "Zhong Kui Escorts His Bride Sister to Her Groom", and his works in the late 1980's, e. g. "A Laughing Monk", "Diligence", and "Huai Su Practices Calligraphy on Banana-tree Leaves", we will easily find a close tie between the master's works and the Xuzhou sub-culture as well as his father's stories.

LI KERAN'S FREE-SKETCHED FIGURES AND HIS PATRIOTIC POSTERS

People generally think that the learning of oil painting and the drawing of patriotic posters was a broken link in the chain of Li's Chinese painting career. However, some people think that Li switched from oil painting to Chinese painting at a later stage to "combine the Chinese and Western traditions". Imprecise as they are, these ideas are not entirely groundless. Some background information about his patriotic posters would be helpful in further understanding of the issue.

Li Keran started to learn oil painting at the age of 22 from Professor Lin Fengmian and Professor Andre Clauodot (1892-1982) at the Research Section of the National West Lake Institute of Art. In a letter to Wang Zhanfei, Li (1980) recalled the time he was involved in oil painting and anti-Japanese posters: "In regard to Gauguin's influence in Zhang Tiao's and my own paintings, I have to admit its presence, especially in terms of colors. But there was one thing which I have to make clear, and that was the dominance of post-impressionism at the time in the institute and our decision to add something more appropriate for the description of an entirely new world. On top of the impressionistic light and color, therefore, we thought about adding the solemnness and the power of expression of Michelangelo, da Vinci, and Botticelli of the Renaissance period, as, for example, Botticelli's pure colors and clear lines are similar to those in Chinese painting. Besides, Millet's plainness

in reflecting peasants' lives, Daumier's satirical attack on the darkness of his time, and Rembrandt's uninhibited strokes, among others things, all had a place in establishing our style. The one that influenced me most, However, was Kollwitz whom I thought pioneered socialist realism in the artistic world. I first came across Kollwitz's works published by Lu Xun shortly after I left the institute in Hangzhou. I admired her so much that immediately after I left Hangzhou I went home and worked at the Third Section of the Political Department and painted numerous anti-Japanese propaganda posters...".

Taking this letter as a clue, we might see Li Keran's artistic practice as well as his posters in the following perspectives:

1. So far as his artistic impetus and his medium of expression are concerned, we could conclude that the large amount of anti-Japanese posters could be attributed both to his patriotic passions and to the fact that Li Keran's pursuit of progressive ideas and revolutionary techniques was but in accordance with the current of receiving democracy and science from the West in the 1920's and 1930's in the wake of the May Fourth Movement. His intense admiration of Kollwitz could be explained in his awareness of and his longing for the advent of an art of the future, an art that falls into the rubric of socialist realism. His standpoint, he realized, was Chinese painting, a medium with which he was determined to mirror a coming new society.

2. The preserved photos of Li's posters reveal a powerful expressiveness of these works. The clear lines, the bold strokes, the earnest attitude, and the plain style, all played a significant role in showing the qualities and the emotions of the Chinese people, especially those of the Chinese peasants. Also shown in Li's works was a satirical and pungent attack on the Japanese invaders and their collaborators. In "Donating Warm Clothes", and "Who Killed Your Children?", Li Keran made a painful appeal and an indignant roar for the hungry and the cold, for the homeless and the devastated Chinese people suffering from the flames of war. The exaggerated images delineated in "The Defeated Enemies" indicated a trace of Daumierian satire. However, Li's appropriation of Western paintings, and even of Kollwitz whom he admired so much, was done on the basis of his own authentic feelings and in the Chinese context, so that creativity dominated his works and no traces of affectedness could be found.

3. From the artistic soul to the artistic language, from the artistic medium to the means of expression, both the body and the soul of Li's posters

were born of the Chinese vernacular culture. The Western paintings helped nourish the development of this organism whose "ties of blood" was entirely Chinese. The posters were anything but conceptualized political diagrams, nor were they suspected of "resembling oxen or sheep after swallowing them". On the contrary, there pulsed in these posters a pulse of the era which represented the anti-Japanese passions of the Chinese people and the painter's burning patriotic heart. The painting of the posters amassed vitality for Li's later paintings of freehand figures. Even his later figures of the classic style and the legendary stories were enlivened by taking in the Western fresh air of his time. In other words, Li Keran formed a modern oriental expressive art with reference to Kollwitz's modern Western expressiveness.

THE EVOLUTION OF LI KERAN'S FREEHAND FIGURES

From an uninhibited style to a more or less restrained mode, and then back to the style of uninhibitedness again. Li Keran's free-sketched figures underwent three stages of stylistic development. This largely parallels the overall style of his artistic career.

From the beginning of the 1940's to the beginning of the 1950's, Li's figures could best be epitomized by the word "uninhibitedness". His style became restrained from the middle of the 1950's to the middle of the 1960's. After the "Cultural Revolution", however, he returned to the unbridled style, which resulted in a flourishing series of free-sketched figures.

In the ten years when Li Keran shifted from anti-Japanese posters to freehand figures, he "exerted every effort to plunge into it (the tradition of Chinese painting)". In this process of learning from the tradition, he established three types of figures typical of his style.

The first type included the heroic figures he painted in order to express his own aspirations. The solemn style of these figures could be viewed as a continuation of his previous tone in painting the posters. He painted portraits for Qu Yuan, a well-known patriotic poet of the Warring Kingdoms period, Du Fu and Li Bai, great poets of the Tang Dynasty, and Tao Yuanming, a renowned poet of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. He also repeatedly portrayed Lu Xun, a great contemporary writer.

The second type comprised traditional themes and classic figures characterized by a humorous style. Works of this type included "Immortal Li With His Iron Walking Stick," "A Girl With A Fan," "Mi Fu Worships A

Stone,” “A Fisherman,” “An Old Man and His Melons,” “A Nap,” “Zhong Kui”, and “Three Pedants”.

The third type of works directly expressed himself and portrayed hard-working intellectuals of the past. Sometimes he endowed seriousness with humor, sometimes he buried humorousness under a solemn cover. This style was fully explored in his later figure paintings. E. g. “Diligence” and “Huai Su Practices Calligraphy on Banana-tree Leaves”.

Li's early figures were characterized by their compositional blanks similar to those arranged in the engraving of relief characters in seals. The loose lines formed a harmonious tone of light-grayness. The swift-flowing strokes revealed an unrestrained personality of a typical literati. Li thus commented upon his early freehand works after he turned over 70: “Though I studied tradition, I roved within the style of looseness and elegance, and conformed to no conventional patterns,” and when compared with his works of the 50's, he said that “the styles were strikingly different, like those of two unrelated individuals”. Empty and alive, natural and unrestrained, facile and graceful, these were the features that symbolized Li's early works in which he candidly selected natural events and delineated dialogues between his figures and their natural environment, or the harmony and integrity between men and nature. These poetic figure paintings are, in this sense, profoundly related to his buffaloes. “Autumn winds brought down a sky of red rain”, this sentence from Shi Tao, a celebrated painter of the Qing Dynasty, sparked so much inspiration, so many suggestions, and so broad conceptions that it haunted Li Keran's artistic world like an volatile artistic spirit. Sometimes it was an intellectual in an infatuated and a obsessed mood, sometimes it was an innocent buffalo boy roaming leisurely.

“The Spirit of Autumn Leaves”(1948) was probably the first picture Li Keran painted after Shi Tao's words: Two slovenly intellectuals roam in an Autumn forest. Immersed in the rhythm of nature, they forget about their own existence, allowing their hair and clothes to dance with Autumn winds and the falling leaves. Free-flowing gossamer lines were used to define the contours of human figures, whereas heavy and stiff lines like iron wires drawn by shriveled brushes and dry ink were employed to sketch out the tree-branches. Light ink and gentle touches were elegantly scattered across the picture, giving life to the winds that seem rhythmical and resilient. Hither and thither they rove, tossed into the air by a mysterious force. Looking at the pic-

ture, you would see the intoxicating "red rain", hear the whistling winds, and feel the coolness of an Autumn forest; even your spirit would seem to be swayed by the winds into a dreamscape. The annotation reads: "Dadizi (Shi Tao) said in his poem, 'Autumn winds brought down a sky of red rain'. I love painting it. Autumn of 1948, Keran." The natural elegance and humor seen in "The Spirit of Autumn Leaves" can also be seen in "A Fisherman" and in "A Nap" painted in the same year. The loosely drawn reeds, the roughly depicted vines, the casually outlined boat, and the briefly sketched chairs, though not confined to reality, were by no means "lazy fantasies". Like the facial make-up of dramatic figures, portraiture of the spirit was done not by observing perspective laws but by breaking them. The old man taking a nap at noon was caricatured with an extraordinarily large head like that of the god of longevity commonly seen in Chinese Spring Festival paintings. Humor was thus conveyed through overstating the pleasure of napping under wild vines. The annotation goes: "My Chinese paintings do not descend from the orthodox masters, they are but graffiti of whimsical inspirations. Small wonder Mr. Somebody labeled them 'heterodoxical'. 1948, Keran."

Li Keran was constantly sneered at by a handful of people like "Mr. Somebody" when his freehand figures became known in the 1940's. On the other hand, Lao She, a celebrated writer, praised highly Li's works after attending a 1944 exhibition of Li's paintings: "So far as figure painting is concerned, Li Keran could well be the best in this country". He also compared the appreciation of Li Keran's works to the eating of "a dish of tender boiled chicken with soy sauce" at the time of poverty. "My spirits were stirred up", he said. Three years later, Xu Beihong wrote an introduction to Li's first exhibition in Peking, and expressed his appreciation of Li's creativity: "Mr. Li Keran of Xuzhou is so talented and original that whatever you see in Xu Tianchi's inordinate landscape and flowers can be found in his figures. His grotesqueness and boldness brim over the confinement of his paintings. His brushes sing, his ink dances. Seldom has anybody been so expressive before. Given time, Mr. Li Keran will surely achieve immeasurable success." After seeing Li's works, Xu insisted, "one should feel the pleasure of eating litchi."

"Immortal Li With His Iron Walking Stick" and "Zhong Kui" best epitomize Li's unrestrained, unadorned, frenzied, and grotesque style. If we zoom in and focus on the details, we should see Immortal Li's face-making and his

artistic career when he accommodated the “spiritual aroma” with that of the ink. The bold and trembling strokes, and the modeling of the figures reinforced a dynamic centrifugal tension which is best seen in Huai Su’s motions and his posture. The lining of the hand, the wrist, the shoulder and the back suggests a highly centralized, highly controlled inner force that is expressing itself through ink and brush.

A poet is depicted in “Diligence” working in candle-light. Both the poet and the candle are using up their energy. The candle is turning into wax-tears while the poet is becoming thinner. A spirit is felt elevated up towards the eternal space.

In the 1960’s, Li Keran had painted a “Diligence” which was destroyed during the “Cultural Revolution”. When he repainted on the theme in the 1980’s, he annotated thus on the picture: “I am not a born genius, nor am I good at taking shortcuts. I admire the diligence of some sages like Du Fu and Jia Dao, thus the painting in 1962 to encourage myself. I was framed during the ten years calamity. This picture is painted to express my feelings after my rehabilitation.” This is an immortal masterpiece in which the self-labeled “Diligence School” master put his life. In the light of his commonly used seals — — “Countless Waste Paintings”, “Numerous Calamities”, “There Is No Easy Route To A High Peak”, “No Wind Blows Off The Hanging Moon” — — we can understand the implied spiritual as well as artistic value of “Diligence”.

LI KERAN’S BUFFALOES

To trace back his first inspirations for painting buffaloes, the artist (1977) noted down some pleasant recollections: “After 1941³, I had a breather in the Cultural Committee. I took that opportunity to restart my explorations in Chinese painting. I remember I was living with a peasant’s family at Jingangpo near Chongqing and my house was next to a cattle fence. I saw my neighbor, a stout buffalo, everyday when it went out for plowing, and I would hear it every evening breathing, ruminating, gnawing its hoofs, and rubbing against the walls. It reminded me of one of Lu Xun’s poems in which he compared himself to a dairy cattle that eats grass and produces milk. I also reminded me of Guo Moruo’s “Ode to the buffalo”. Many other outstanding artists and scientists had also likened themselves to cattle which are famous for their life-long assiduity and dedication. It hence

occurred to me that what China needed most of her subjects at the time of war and hardships was exactly what cattle are famed for. Besides, the honest looks of cattle also attracted my attention. I thus began to paint my neighbor with Chinese ink. ⁴”

From then on, Li Keran established an indissoluble bond with buffaloes. The preceding passage of recollection vindicated himself as a devoted patriot. He later made a seal “Cattle of the People” and named his studio “Cattle’s Disciple’s Hall” to show his persistent effort in learning from cattle. “Cattle of the People” showed the spiritual and artistic pursuit of this great master of Chinese painting. It also revealed the truest, the best, the most beautiful, and the happiest realm of his ideals. He was not a person who alienated himself from the bustling world to find refuge and pleasure in natural landscapes and the countryside.

THE EVOLUTION OF LI KERAN’S BUFFALOES

Starting from the age of thirty-five to the end of his life, Li Keran assiduously painted buffaloes for forty-seven years. He loved buffaloes, praised buffaloes, and compared himself to buffaloes. To him, cattle was a symbol of assiduity and devotion. Composing the march of buffalo life was what he did throughout his painting career.

People with little knowledge of Li would probably think that his buffaloes were nothing more than repetitions. They are entirely wrong. For the painting of buffaloes not only requires constant observation and examination of the animal, it also presupposes a process of sketching, remembering, distilling and expressing, from realistic depiction to freehand expression. It is a process of creation as well as a process of industrious practice. The modeling of buffaloes using the Chinese brush and ink as such, for example, requires painstaking training. Piles after piles of practice paper resulted in Li’s seemingly breathing buffaloes. One can, as it were, feel the steam coming out of the buffaloes’ noses. This reminds people of Qi Baishi, Li’s teacher, who kept altering his styles in painting shrimps and even reduced the number of feelers of his shrimps in his later years. In Li’s early works, there were five muscular joints on the buffaloes’ necks. These joints became fewer and fewer until, after eighty years of age, only one or two broken brushes were left, and yet they looked so sufficiently expressive that the buffaloes seemed even more forceful and vigorous. After seeing an exhibition of the late Qi Baishi in

1958, Li Keran had this to say: "Master Qi Baishi's style has always been changing. As late as in his nineties, he changed his way of painting shrimps and removed several feelers to make the modeling simpler and more energetic. If we compare his early works with his later ones, we'll find an amazing change to the point of entirely remodeling." Thirty years later, when we look at Li Keran's buffaloes, we have a similar feeling to his about his beloved teacher. His words about Qi Baishi seem to be most appropriate and penetrating about himself and his art.

The inspirations, the motives, the conceptions, and the implications of Li Keran's buffaloes all came from a profound, steadfast, intense, and lasting patriotic passion. "Cattle of the People" was the starting point from which Li derived the following three major types of buffalo paintings:

Type I. Portraying buffaloes to eulogize their assiduity and dedication.

Type II. Featuring buffaloes in order to express himself and to motivate himself.

Type III. Seasonal buffalo herding--a series of poetic pastoral paintings derived and developed from other buffalo paintings.

Type I is represented by "Five Buffaloes" (1962) and the monumental "Nine buffaloes" (1980). Type I paintings seldom portray buffaloes with plows and saddles. The genuine nature of the buffaloes is illustrated by their varying postures; some face the audience, others walk away from us; some show their front, others show their side; some stand, others crouch; some raise a hoof, others swing their tails. Calves linger around their mothers. Without exhaustive observation and a genuine and subtle feeling for buffaloes, these depictions would never have come into being. The annotation reads: "Though of great strength, buffaloes are always humble and never show off. It is but grass they eat, and it is milk they produce. Toiling for a life time they are content with everyday trivialities. Their characters are mild, with only occasional stubbornness. They walk steadily and are down to earth. Unshowy as they look, they have an imposing presence. I adore their characters and love their appearances. Never have I been bored of portraying them." These close-up delineations of buffaloes also portrayed the spirit of the artist himself, suggesting plainly his steadfast dedication to his beloved country.

The second type of buffalo portraiture are so plain and unadorned that

they are overflowing with the artist's humorous character. Sometimes the buffalo boy sits on the back of a buffalo and enjoys himself; sometimes he lies on the animal's back and flies a kite; sometimes he even sleeps on the buffalo's back and lets it roam around. The benign animal serves as an inseparable pal as well as a cozy cradle.

The stubbornness of buffaloes was one of the themes on which the artist used to explore with a keen interest. From the 1940's to the 1960's, Li Keran painted quite a series of stubborn buffaloes, ranging from realistic depictions of buffaloes and their surrounding landscape to freehand expressive buffalo portraiture.

"Pulling a Buffalo" was one of his early works in Chongqing. In a vertical hanging scroll, a boy and a buffalo compete with each other along a linear line, revealing an amusing stalemate in which the two opposite sides are locked. The annotation reads: "An ordinary scene in Sichuan province. I painted it for fun. Keran." "Why Don't You Come?" (1951) again depicted a boy and a buffalo confronting each other along a diagonal of the rectangular painting. The relaxing orchid-leaf-lines of his early works are now substituted by steady iron-wires. The realistic style manifestes the delights of life, showing the obstinacy of the buffalo as well as the naive questioning of the buffalo boy, and as a result, achieves an effect of dramatic tension. "A Stubborn Buffalo" (1962) was a direct self-reference. At the age of 55, Li Keran was turning out a ripened art of his own. After exactly 20 years since he painted his first buffalo, he had gone through a process of reformation to Chinese painting. This stubborn buffalo could be viewed as a reply to all the hindrances he had met. So far as his artistic media are concerned, Li Keran had established a modern freehand expressive style of the Orient, far surpassing the imitating and expressive fashion once popular in contemporary Chinese art history, towering above the realistic sketching vogue in the modern artistic world. "A Stubborn Buffalo." together with "Five Buffaloes", "Zhong Kui Escorts His Bride Sister To Her Groom", and the "Garden of Delights" of the same year were all epitomizing works of his matured art. In "A Stubborn Buffalo", dry ink was used to depict the stubbornness of the creature. This was reinforced by a rope. For tension was expressed by the shortening of the part of rope left between the boy and the buffalo, and relaxation shown by the part that trailed behind the boy. On the one hand, this trailing stroke implied an interesting state of long confrontation, on the other

hand, it formed a scalene triangle, which, compared with the last two buffalo paintings mentioned here, complicated the composition, making it much more interesting and thought-provoking. Here, the conceptional depth, the formal beauty, and the calligraphic rhythm were fully integrated, "mingling the buffalo's nature into mine", "voiding the world and myself".

Seasonal buffalo herding, the theme of a series of paintings that articulated directly and pleasantly the modern man's dream of returning to nature and harmonizing with it, brims over with human sentiments and is thus well liked. These multifold paintings are of high and healthy aesthetic value. Facing a poetic picture of this kind, you would hear a distant reed coming from afar.

This type of painting's extend to multifarious motifs that are shown in nearly a hundred pictures. The most commonly seen motifs include:

Spring --e. g. "Flying A Kite When Willows Turn Green", "Spring Is Surely On the Branches", "Herding Buffaloes in Spring Drizzle", "Beholding the Mountains," and "The Break of a Cloudy Day".

Summer --e. g. "Shadow of an Old Tree," "Chatting Under A Tree", "In the Shade of a Banian Tree", "Bathing Buiffaloes", and "In the Charming Dusk".

Autumn --e. g. "Charming Autumn", "Autumn Winds Brought Down a Sky of Red Rain", "A Sky of Autumn Leaves", "Buffalo Herding in an Autumn Forest", and "Autumn Rain".

Winter -- e. g. "Buffalo Herding in Winter", "Buffalo Herding in Snow", and "An Old Pine is Not Flowery, However It is Ever-green".

In addition, there are the various beautiful compositions touched off by seasonal attractions: "Returning at dusk", one hears the cries of crows in the bushes penetrated by evening glows; "Returning in Storm", one feels the coldness in the whipping storm. One can sense the childlike heart of the painter in "The Buffalo Boy Plays With Birds"; one can also hear the melodious flute while "The Buffalo Closes its Eyes In Delight". All these candid improvisations reflect the master's deep love and infatuation for natural scenery, they also mirror the painter's sharp eyes and lively imaginations. Therefore, the seasonal buffalo-herding paintings could be regarded as preludes to or variations on the biographical sketches of our motherland.

A thorough analysis of the chronological development of Li's buffalo paintings is beyond the scope of the present article. A silhouette is thus provided here to sketch out the establishment and variation of his styles across a time span of forty-seven years. The style of Li's buffaloes, understandably, is in line with the development of his Chinese paintings as a whole. "In the last ten years, Li Keran's heroic vision and romantic conceptions brought him from 'the realm of description' to 'the realm of construction', elevating his paintings from the 'free-style calligraphy' of his early works to the 'proper-style calligraphy' and later back to the 'free-style calligraphy' at a higher level. His use of ink, accordingly, changed from ink-amassing to ink-splashing integrated with ink-amassing, combining the aroma of ink and that of his artistic conceptions. In the mean time, Li's composition converted from the 'grotesqueness in regularity' that characterized his mid-career to an ideal phase when regularity was seen in grotesqueness. The modern abstract elements underscored in his later works represented an energetic spirit of the time--monumental, profound, vigorous, and open."⁵ Li Keran's paintings had thus far revealed an increasing sign of modernity, which manifested the establishment of Li's art as "modern Oriental expressive free-sketched paintings".

In his early buffalo paintings, e. g. "Pulling a Buffalo" (1942), "In the Charming Dusk" (1945), and "Returning in Storm" (1948), Li Keran pursued a principle of simplicity. Like in freestyle calligraphy, his paintings were done with very few brush strokes improvised at will. Several willow twigs were placed against a large blank background. A few reeds intersected each other and looked so lively and unrestrained. Thread-like ripples swiftly floated along the swimming buffaloes. A boy in straw rain cape and bamboo hat emerged on a buffalo's back. Simple and unaffected, these compositions, like his remote childhood, seldom again appeared in his later buffalo paintings.

From the very beginning, the artistic inspirations in Li Keran's buffalo paintings came from his observation of life, his feelings towards it, and his reflections about it. His unique style was formed on the basis of painting from life, integrating, in the mean time, the styles of literati painting and traditions of folk art. While the buffalo boys, the simple branches and light twigs still revealed the elegance of Qingteng, Shitao, and Bada Shanren, the buffalo graffiti disclosed the naivety of clay figurines popular in Chinese folk

art. The prostrating buffalo looked so much like a small hill, while the lump of ink formed the back of another buffalo. Innocence and naivety seemed to be brimming over.

The 1950's and 1960's foreshadowed a transitional variation in Li Keran's buffaloes. The densely packed trees in "Returning From Herding", the feverishly dotted colors in "Under Maple Trees in Late Autumn" (1954) and "Maple Leaves in Autumn Winds" (1965), heralded a stylistic transition from loose compositions to elaborated structures, from fluid "freehand calligraphy" to poised "proper-style calligraphy" of painting. This transition was successfully completed in the beginning of 1980's when a new style of buffaloes emerged in accordance with his solemn and voluminous landscapes and his majestic and elegant calligraphy. "Plum Blossoms" (September, 1984), "Chatting Under a Tree", "Buffalo Herding in an Autumn Forest" (June 10, 1984), and "Buffalo Herding in Snow" (March, 1984) represented the new style and new painting method in this stage. Three distinctive features have been highlighted to account for the brush and ink application in these paintings: Firstly, large steady and smooth strokes were used, coupled with large lumps of wet ink, to form the shape of buffaloes. Secondly, rough and loose lines drawn by dry ink were used to depict the buffalo boys and the ox horns, showing a striking contrast between the lines and the lumps of ink. Thirdly, the intersecting lines and the heavily dotted spots revealed thick forests and exuberant foliage, integrating the boys and the buffaloes into the wholeness of nature.⁶ The above three features best epitomize the brush work of Li Keran's midterm and later period. Twenty years of transitional exploration saw a wide spectrum of styles of his buffalo paintings ranging from uninhibited styles to refined expressions, from simplicity to complexity, from freehand calligraphy to proper-style calligraphy. In 1984, Li's artistic conceptions were so broad, his strokes so mature, and his compositions so unique that the aroma of his works, like that of old wine, brimmed over and intoxicated every viewer. His buffalo paintings were no longer pastoral songs of a petite peasants' community, nor were they conceptualized preaches, they were immortal creations full of philosophical poetry; they bore a unique compositional style typical of this age.

THE DEDICATION OF LI KERAN'S LAST YEARS