

## Fang-kuei Li: A Personal Memoir

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### **Introduction**

The late Professor Fang-kuei Li has been aptly called one of the great linguists of our century. That century is now drawing to a close, and the time has perhaps come, ten years after his death, to begin a retrospective contemplation of his life and work. Li is renowned in four different areas, i.e. Athabaskan, Chinese, Tibetan, and Tai; and it seems unlikely that anyone individual will be able to judge his work in all these quite different fields. My own familiarity is limited to two of them, Chinese and Tibetan; but even here I am certain that there are others who are better qualified than I to make a final judgment. What, then, can I contribute to the ongoing assessment? Because I knew Li and was closely associated with him for somewhat over twenty years, it has seemed to me that my most worthwhile contribution might be a personal remembrance of our contacts, highlighting points which would not be known to many others, and thereby filling in areas of the canvas which might otherwise remain blank. This memoir is that personal reminiscence.

I first met Professor Li, whom his students always called Lǐ Xiānshēng 李先生 in Chinese and "Dr. Li" in English, in August, 1966; and he remained my teacher and mentor until his death in August, 1987, twenty-one years later. He was my undergraduate and then graduate advisor at the University of Washington until he left in August of 1969. Three weeks later began a correspondence between us which lasted until late June, 1987, shortly after which he was felled by a stroke which ended his life two months later. From 1981 until 1986 we collaborated closely on a study of the Old Tibetan inscriptions, which was published shortly before his death. These reminiscences derive from my memories of that varied association, which covered the last twenty years of his life and the intellectually formative ones of mine.

### **Li as Teacher**

My formal studies with Li involved classes of three types. At the basic level was the introductory course in Chinese historical phonology, which was often taken not only by students entering that area of study but also by many who used it to fulfill requirements for the Ph. D. program at the University of Washington. At the next level were seminars in the same subject. These were taken by fewer students but were often attended by many auditors. Then there were small independent reading courses on specialized topics of many kinds, taken by one, or at most two or three students. Beyond this formal course work were long and memorable hours of consultation in the office.

The large introductory course was organized in an informal way, which was Li's basic teaching style. There were no syllabi or scheduled readings as such, few if any textbooks on order in the bookstore or on reserve in the library, etc. As the course began, the framework of the field was sketched and basic materials were introduced. Students were then expected to acquire and read as much as possible of this background material and to do the "spade-work" of the course on their own. The system worked efficiently. There was a network of students who

ordered, assembled, and copied or circulated the necessary reading materials. Material ordered from afar was acquired before the beginning of the course and was at hand when needed. There were frequent gatherings of students on and off the campus in which those who were more advanced helped the beginners with basic problems. And Li was of course always available for consultation. At the beginning of a typical class Li would enter the room, stand before the lectern, and remove from his pocket a single sheet of paper upon which was written a list of a dozen or so entries. He would look this over and then put it down and begin to speak. At the outset of the course he would quickly identify any native speakers of Chinese in the class (of whom there were invariably quite a few) and determine their native dialects. These persons would then serve as informants throughout the term. Beyond the introductory framework there was no "spoon-feeding" of basic information. Students were expected to acquire this on their own. Instead, topics covered in the class sessions would be geared to the particular informants who were available. Sessions dealing with dialectology would focus on their languages, and comparative and reconstructive exercises would be built around the material they could supply. Thus, what was presented in the class sessions tended to be material of a sort which could not be directly acquired from the basic readings. Instead, it gave the students something over and above those readings. Each student taking the course for credit was required to do an oral book report on some major technical work in the field. The reports had to be brief but were followed by extensive discussions. These began with a penetrating questioning of the speaker by Li, usually followed by a wide-ranging give-and-take involving all present who cared to participate. The format of the course was clearly intended for persons who were actively interested in the field and intended to pursue it in depth. For them it was an exhilarating and inspiring beginning. But for those who were marking time or "just taking it for the credit" it must have been a baptism of fire.

On one occasion I cut a class in another area to sit in on Li's basic course in comparative Tai. The session began with a rather formal introduction, taken from extensive notes, to the historical and geographical setting of a particular Tai language of Laos. Then followed a straightforward presentation of the sound system, with copious examples in tabular form, again taken from notes. The approach here was decidedly different from that followed in the Chinese phonology course. It would seem that a different forum demanded a different format.

The seminars usually involved a beginning series of talks by Li on some advanced subject, followed by the inevitable assigned reports and discussions on books or articles dealing in some way with the general theme which had been chosen. After this might come further presentations by students on their individual research and/or similar presentations by Li himself on his ongoing work. From year to year these courses, both basic and advanced, were never the same, and so the custom was for everyone interested in Chinese linguistics to repeat them yearly as unofficial auditors. I remember the class and seminar rooms being packed, regardless of how many persons were taking the courses for credit.

But the true joy of my student years was the independent reading course, for here one more often than not had the master to oneself and could explore one's own concerns with him at length. These classes began in a sense as bibliography courses. Having agreed on the topic of the course, one would begin compiling a list of works on that particular subject and then come in to discuss the list, which was of course continually expanding. Li would comment on the list, giving his views of each work, mentioning things which should be added, etc. But, in addition to the list itself, he always insisted that the student have a related research project in progress, for he felt that the purely passive activity of compiling the bibliography would be unproductive. One

had to be looking for the answer to something, rather than just assembling titles. At the end of the course, one had to report orally on the project and then submit a paper on it. When the term was over, one had in hand that paper, fully vetted by Li, and a detailed bibliography on the subject.

Li's interactive style as a teacher was one of restraint and understatement. In order to appreciate him at the personal level, one had to understand this and be continually attuned to his fine nuances. For example, he was exceedingly chary of praise. To have a piece of work received by him with little comment, i.e. with little in the way of corrections or suggestions of any kind, was cause for deep satisfaction. For him to say something was "okay" or "pretty good" was reason for celebration. To hear from a third party (for that is the only way one would hear it) that he felt one had done a "fine job" was grounds for ecstasy. Li could and would offer much to those he felt were genuinely interested, but he expected his students to be inquisitive and alert. He liked to give hints which would lead the student to the truth, but he would not simply serve it up on a platter. As an example, I was once going through with him a list I was compiling on Written Tibetan verbal morphology. We came to a long-winded but interesting title in German, a dissertation from the University of Vienna. I asked if I should try to get it, and he said, "No, don't bother." I was surprised and asked why not. He said, "You can read the English version of that in item such-and-such, above." His face was in repose when he said this, and I was prepared to move on, when I caught the tell-tale twinkle in his eyes. I said, "But, Dr. Li, this is a doctoral dissertation and has a later date than the English work, how can it simply be a translation?" Then he smiled and told me the story of one of the great cases of academic plagiarism in that particular corner of Tibetology. But, had I not spoken up, he would have said nothing.

In personal style I believe Li as a teacher was much influenced by his own teachers, for whom he felt great admiration and respect. Edward Sapir is said to have entered his classes, looked briefly at a card, and then taught for an hour extempore. Leonard Bloomfield, according to Li's own account, would meet a student in his office, ask him what he had been reading lately, and from there initiate a discussion which would lead to further assignments and ultimately to extended research projects. Karl Darling Buck is said to have chosen during the first hours of a class the students he felt were best, set the pace at a point where they could barely keep up, and then let everyone sink or swim as he might. Something of each of these men survived in Li's teaching.

I heard Li use the Chinese expression *wǒ de lǎoshī* 我的老師, "my teacher," in reference to two different individuals. One was of course Sapir. The other was François Mandeville, a *métis* fur trader and Hudson Bay Company employee from whom Li had elicited data on Chipewyan and certain other Athabaskan languages. Li had enormous respect for this man and never referred to him simply as an informant.

## **Li as Mentor**

Li's role as mentor was so closely bound with that of teacher that it is seldom possible to separate the two. In addition to innumerable words of advice on technical matters, he would occasionally offer me guidance of a more general nature.

Li was concerned that his influence on his students might be too great, i.e. that their awe for him and his ideas, of which he was certainly aware, might stifle original lines of inquiry among those who had studied with him. I believe he enjoyed having students who viewed him as their master, but he was equally concerned that they not become "followers" or "disciples." Thus,

on one occasion he wrote to me urging that I set aside certain earlier approaches and attitudes and, as he put it, "try to generate some new ideas." On the other hand, he in no way favored incautious innovation for its own sake. During the last years of our association I was beginning new research on Chinese historical phonology. I became quite enthused over this and wrote him about it in exuberant terms. He answered that the work was indeed interesting; but, he said, "Be careful not to take yourself too seriously."

There was about Li a certain natural shyness in some areas, and this, coupled with innate respect for the privacy of others, meant that he seldom offered counsel of a personal nature. There were, however, some exceptions to this, of which the following are examples.

When I was chairman of my department I had to deal with a particularly difficult and vexatious colleague. Li was acquainted with this individual. On one occasion I mentioned the case to him, and he passed over it somewhat lightly, saying, "Oh, he's just a highly emotional person. Try not to let him get to you." But I did not view the matter in this light, and I told him of some of my rather deep-seated anger about it. He remained silent for a while, looking off into the distance. At last, he spoke and said, "I think he is pitiful." Then he turned, looked into my eyes, and said, "And I think you should pity him."

At one point, earlier on in my career, I felt myself to be under attack from a certain quarter in the field. I had mentioned this once to Li; but he clearly disliked discussing such things, so I consciously avoided further references to it. However, I suppose it seeped through in some subtle way. For, some while later and in a letter devoted entirely to technical matters, he added the following unsolicited postscript: "P.S. Forget about -----."

On one occasion Li wrote me a rather formally worded epistle, on his own initiative rather than in response to anything I had sent him. He stated that he suspected certain of his students were coming under the gun as a result of efforts to get at him. He then apologized for any personal distress or professional harm my association with him might have caused. It was a sad moment, but it did give me an opportunity to affirm to him that I had no regrets whatever about having been his student, and that neither hell nor high water could ever change that.

Li clearly did not relish the role of personal or private mentor, but he would assume it without reservation when he thought it necessary to do so.

## **Li as Scholar**

It is in his role as scholar that Li is best known, for his published works are a lasting monument to that role. What I add here are impressions of a more personal nature, based on my contacts with him.

My most vivid memories of Li as scholar come from visits to his office. His demeanor there was, as always, quiet and restrained. When I arrived at his door he was more often than not sitting in his chair, perhaps holding a book, perhaps not, and seemingly staring off into space, as if in contemplation of some sort. There was at first a general impression that he was doing very little. But next to him was a large desk on which there was always an enormous mound of books and papers, and frequent visits quickly revealed that this mound was constantly evolving in shape and content. If I asked him about something we had discussed earlier, he would say, "Which day was it that we talked about that 1" And, on having been told, he would assess the mound like an archaeologist doing a stratigraphic probe, and in a moment out would come the pertinent material. The mound was actually a catalogue which only he could read. So

in fact, Li was working constantly, but under a self-devised regimen which was not immediately apparent to others. Hints about the nature of that regimen occasionally emerged, though. During his last years I was continually exchanging with him material related to our collaborative work, and at one point I began to send even more things, connected to other research I was doing on my own but which I thought would interest him. At our next meeting he thanked me for these extraneous items but apologized that he was not able to read them. When I asked why he remarked that recently he had begun to experience a sort of fatigue which made it impossible to concentrate for longer than ten minutes at a time. As a result he had divided his day into a series of ten minute intervals, punctuated by the requisite rest periods; and he had to ration these time segments carefully in order to complete the basic work he needed to do. He no longer had the luxury of browsing and desultory reading which we all take for granted; but his reaction to this loss was a practical and disciplined one.

As mentioned earlier, students in Li's courses were often asked to choose topics for research assignments, and this usually involved some consultation with him. I can recall a number of such consultations, in which he urged students to choose restricted topics and then mine them intensively for all they were worth. His stock advice seemed to be, "Don't be too general." or "Don't be too broad." He himself often worked in this mode, as, for example, in his masterful study of the Tai loan names for the Chinese cyclical signs. He preferred depth of coverage to generalities, meticulous detail to broader strokes.

A salient characteristic of Li's approach to scholarship was his concern with data. On one occasion I was working with a number of things which for a long time seemed irreconcilable. Then, at last, I hit upon a grand scheme which seemed to encompass them all, and I wrote him a jubilant letter about it. When I saw him somewhat later, he remarked that my solution was interesting and indeed quite ingenious. But then he added, "Always beware of truly clever solutions to linguistic problems. Avoid them whenever possible. For the real solutions to questions about language are almost invariably simple and require no ingenuity. The difficulties we have with these things are more often than not due to lack of data. If we had enough data, the problems would not be difficult in the first place. Usually, it is better to set a truly vexing problem aside and look for more data than to propound a clever solution." This story illustrates not only Li's respect for data, but also the other side of the coin, i.e. his strong suspicion of theoretical speculation. Even in the best of circumstances he was leery of theorizing, and in the absence of copious data he had no use for it at all.

Respect for data was also the source for Li's unwavering position on work in comparative linguistics. Leonard Bloomfield, with his famous tongue in cheek irony, is reported to have said, "If you want to compare some languages, it helps to know at least one of them." Minus the irony, this perfectly reflects Li's position. He often spoke of the need to know the languages one wanted to compare, by which he meant an in-depth familiarity with their structure, including, if possible, an ability to read and/or speak them. If one were comparing two languages, one should gain this level of familiarity with both before undertaking comparison. If one were comparing language families, then he should have an in-depth knowledge of at least one member of each family before beginning. Once, in speaking of Samuel Moore, his undergraduate professor of Old English at the University of Michigan, he said to me, "This man truly knew his field, and it would be good if the same could be said of more members of ours." Li had little use for the comparative work of dictionary cullers, which he considered uninformed speculation.

Li's love of data and dislike for theorizing arose, I think, from an innate caution and conservatism which can be seen in all his work. For example, it was almost impossible to get

him to comment on wider linguistic relationships. Discussion of these questions, which required conjectures based on relatively few data, was anathema to him. If one were so bold as to ask such a thing, the answer was usually just a smile, a shrug, and perhaps an "I don't know." But not in every case. On one occasion I had the effrontery to ask him what he thought of the theory that Sino-Tibetan and Athabaskan are related. For my trouble, I received the expected smile; and I thought that would be the end of it. But then he spoke and said, "That can be an interesting hobby, but don't ever write anything about it." In fact, I suspect that Li was not above indulging in some "interesting hobbies" in cloistered moments. But he considered these to be private matters. He would not speak of them to others, and he would never have dreamed of writing about them.

In this connection it is interesting that during his last years and since his death Li has been particularly well known for his work in the field of "Old Chinese," in certain respects a rather conjectural subject. At the outset it is worth noting that he did not care for the term "Old Chinese" itself and seemed to avoid it if at all possible. Instead, he preferred the older expression, "Archaic Chinese." To be frank, I finally began to wonder if this was some sort of dyed-in-the-wool terminological conservatism; and so finally, in the early '80's, I asked him about it. His reply, cryptic as always, was that he was afraid the term "Old Chinese" might make more of the subject than it really was, and so he was hesitant to use it. At the time I did not understand what he meant. But now, twenty years later and a decade after his death, I think I do. In his time Li had studied many "old" languages, e.g. Old English, Old High German, Old Norse, Old Persian, Old Tibetan, etc., etc. And in every case these "old" languages were well attested in extensive, alphabetically recorded texts, where phonology, morphology, and syntax were susceptible to reasonably precise analysis. What was beginning to be called "Old Chinese" at the time we spoke was something of a very different order, compared to the other "olds" he knew. Thus, he preferred the unique and idiosyncratic term "Archaic Chinese" as a sobriquet for it.

In the 1930's Li wrote several articles dealing with Archaic Chinese, and in the 40's and 50's he mentioned it occasionally in his publications. He taught the subject for years at the University of Washington, as part of his offerings on Chinese historical phonology. And in these classes a full reconstructed "system" was beginning to emerge by the mid to late sixties. He enjoyed sharing this in class with his students, but to the best of my knowledge he had no active plans to publish it at that time. It was something he did as matter of personal interest. Then, in 1968 he gave a series of lectures on his system at Academia Sinica and Taiwan National University. These were tape-recorded, and the recordings were subsequently transcribed. The transcriptions were then mimeographed and circulated informally under the title Shànggǔyīn 上古音. From Taiwan copies quickly reached North America, where the newly developed miracle of Xerography quickly resulted in multiple copies. Everybody wanted one. Some of these copies were also acquired by major research libraries and were catalogued under Li's name, as if they were published books. Li was taken aback by this, but it forced his hand in a way that nothing else could have. During his last year in Seattle he began to write up the material in publishable form and read it aloud as his contribution to the seminars he was teaching. Several years later it appeared in print in the *Tsing-hua Journal of Chinese Studies* and was later republished as a book in Peking. The material was well received, and as time passed Li seemed to warm more and more to the subject of Archaic Chinese, making further contributions to it in various places. But I have always wondered whether he would have published his system had the above-mentioned course of events not occurred. For his writings in this area were not really characteristic of the sort of work he did in other fields, i.e. in Tibetan and in comparative Athabaskan and Tai.

In summary, Li's scholarly approach as I saw it was characterized by cautious restraint and conservative skepticism, firm faith in and meticulous attention to data, and a strong suspicion of theorizing which departed to any significant extent from the foundation of a supporting data base.

## **Li as a Man**

In the 1960's the department at the University of Washington was a complex mixture of interesting and sometimes difficult personalities. There seemed to be a constant series of storms and squalls there, punctuated by the occasional full-fledged typhoon. Li moved through this cyclonic turbulence with absolute equanimity, as unruffled as if relaxing on a millpond. His calm and serenity were legendary. In later years, when I sometimes reacted to the buffets of academic and personal life in a very different way, my wife would say to me, "Why can't you be more like Dr. Li? He would never have let this bother him!" But I doubt if that would have been possible for me, then or even now. An innate calmness of mind and gentleness of spirit, an extraordinarily subtle understanding of human nature, and a long and varied experience of that nature in his fellow men, had congealed in a unique way to form the character of this man, whose tranquility I would have loved to emulate if I could have.

Li seemed to soar above all tribulation and emotional turmoil, but that was not an entirely accurate view of him. From Mrs. Li's biographical accounts we know that he was subject to the same emotions as any other man. It was rather an ability not to surrender himself to those emotions which made him seem beyond their reach. In my contacts I got occasional inklings of this. On one occasion during my student days I was meeting regularly with him to discuss problems in Written Tibetan morphology. We touched on a paper by Robert Shafer in which, referring to Li's classic study of interactions between Tibetan prefixes and root initials, Shafer suggested what to me appeared to be hare-brained alternate views and then, with his characteristic lack of diplomacy, said something to the effect that, "If F. K. Li knew more about Tibeto-Burman languages he would never have made such a mistake as that." Li specifically mentioned this comment, shrugged, and said, "Well, what does Shafer know about Tibeto-Burman languages?" As these things go, this seems a mild reaction; but for Li it was unusual, and so I looked up. Then I could see that he had been genuinely hurt by Shafer's remark and that it still rankled after so many years.

In fact, though Li was quite willing to objectively criticize the scholarly work of others, he avoided adverse comments of a personal nature. If on occasion he had been genuinely and deeply offended by someone, as is unavoidable in any normal life, he would say of that person, "I don't know him." That was his strongest censure of another individual, and I heard him use it only four of five times in all the years I knew him.

Human beings are immensely complex, and it is unlikely that any person completely knows another. There were many interesting aspects of Li's character of which I had only hints.

On one occasion Li was visiting us in our home and spent the afternoon with an individual in our town who claimed to be an expert in Chinese calligraphy and landscape painting. On returning that evening, Li was carrying several scrolls which his host had given him. I commented on this, and he began to unroll one. But then he glanced uneasily at me out of corner of his eye, quickly rolled it up again, and said, "Ah well, he has a long way to go yet, that's for sure. But he's improving, he's improving." This remark was made matter of factly, as if he had been commenting on a scholarly work. There was no hint of the tell-tale twinkle in his

eye, and it was clear that he was speaking with absolute seriousness. Years later I learned from comments written by his daughter, Dr. Lindy L. Mark, that he was a talented watercolor painter in both Western and classical Chinese styles.

Li's office at the University of Washington, which was of course lined with books, was an architecturally complex affair with many nooks and crannies. He once asked me to fetch something from a back corner where I had not been before, and there I saw a collection of books dealing with poetry and poetics in Chinese and various other languages. I asked about it, and he said, "Oh, that's just some oil I keep back there." Thinking I had misheard, I inquired further. And with the twinkle very evident he said, "Now and again one needs to read something different, to oil the mind."

But I suspect that there was more to it than this, for I sensed in him on more than one occasion a deep concern with aesthetics. He once told me that, of the things he had written in his life, one of which he was most proud was a prize essay he had done as a student at Michigan, on painting and poetics in the Laocoön of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Then, characteristically, he added, "And, you know, in preparation for the contest I read Lessing in the original, whereas my classmates read him in English translation!"

There are some things in life which are impossible to fully understand, and which we are perhaps not meant to understand. In the spring of 1987 the work on the Tibetan inscriptions was finished and ready for the press. It seemed to me that things were moving along well. Then, in early April he wrote to me and in passing expressed the hope that the publishing process could be hastened, for he wanted to live to see the volume in print. Li was a man who spoke in understatement, and this remark truly alarmed me. I wrote back with deep concern and also took the opportunity to express my gratitude to him for what our long association had meant to me. He replied with some embarrassment, but I think not without some pleasure too, and reassured me that there was nothing wrong with his health. However, he then added, "Don't dawdle, though. Go ahead and get it out." I hastened then to contact my old friend, Professor Ting Pang-hsin, with whose help the printing process was expedited. The book appeared during his final illness but while he was still able to hold it in his hands and see it in print. I have always suspected that he had some sort of premonition of the end that spring, but what form it may have taken I shall never know.

All men are multi-faceted and complex. This was F. K. Li the man, as I knew him.

## **Conclusion**

Writing these reminiscences has been in certain ways cathartic, and therefore also difficult. There has been sadness in the effort. But, on reflection, it is not the memories that are sad. The sadness arises out of the realization of loss. The recollections themselves are joyful, because the life we remember was meaningful, productive, and joyful. For this reason, the memories will ultimately not sadden, but rather sustain us.

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