

A BRIEF BIO OF LI KIANG

Albert G. Wilson, May 12, 1988;(also 5/27/91; 6/14/88)

Scholars are not in agreement just as to who Li Kiang was. Little is known of his life or times. What is known of him is surmised based on his “codalects” or succinct sayings. And from these very little that is definite can be concluded about his life. Most authorities agree that the codalects indicate the influence of both Lao Tzu and Confucius, and some feel the codalects suggest the influence of Chuang Tzu. Others, however, contend that Li Kiang lived prior to Chuang Tzu and the resemblance of certain of Li’s Codalects to Chuang Tzu’s Inner Chapters was due to Li Kiang’s influence on Chuang Tzu. This is debatable. But most authorities hold it is safe to locate Li Kiang sometime around 250 B.C., though certain of the codalects suggest a somewhat later date.

Where Li lived is also uncertain. Some identify Li Kiang with the “Sage of Guilin” (perhaps through association with the river Li). But there is strong evidence (1) supportive of the view that Li never lived in nor was ever near Guilin, nor even in that part of China in all his life. Others suggest he may have lived nearby Lieh Tzu (who road wind like Quetzacoatl) so see the book of Lieh Tzu.

There is also the question of Li’s profession. While it is well known that both Lao Tzu and Confucius were counselors and advisors to emperors and government, there is no evidence supporting that Li Kiang ever held an advisory post. None of the court historians of those times (or later) mention him.

There is one story, probably apocryphal, that the gate keeper who charged Lao Tzu with the writing of the Tao Te Ching, did not convey all that Lao Tzu wrote, but withheld portions which he thought he could sell at a later date, after the popularity of the part which was conveyed would lead to demand for a sequel. This plan misfired since the Tao Te Ching did not become popular in his lifetime. However, the manuscript was preserved and, according to the story, it was later found and brought to light by Li Kiang who, taking as the basis for his Codalects, published it. This story does great injustice to both Lao Tzu and Li Kiang and is felt to be pure fabrication concocted at a later date. (There will always be those who will not let Shakespeare be the author of Shakespeare but insist the plays attributed to him must have been written by Bacon or Marlowe or some other ghostwriter.

In the absence of any information throwing light on just who Li Kiang was, we shall have to be content to judge him by what he reveals to us in his Codalects. And as with Lao Tze, there is always the question whether he existed at all. It has even been suggested that the gatekeeper himself was Li Kiang.

The name Li Kiang itself is interesting because it is found throughout early Chinese history. In the I Ching, “Li” means the Will of Heaven (as interpreted and made to prevail on earth (cf. Theosis Vajrayana)(~Tibetan Buddhism)(p. 126). “Li” in other traditions means “depends on or rests on something,” or “stands for nature in its radiance,” or “everything that gives light is dependent on something to which it clings, in order that it may continue to shine.” But as Li Kiang himself said: “There are many varieties of existence, some here, some elsewhere.” We simply do not know to what variety of existence Li Kiang belonged. (cf. Li Kiang & Bourbaki – mathematicians). Li Kiang has also been suggested to be the 54th Chan Patriarch (the first patriarch, Bodhidharma, is

credited as the transmitter of Chan Buddhism to China). Perhaps no one knows when Li Kiang lived for he was not localized in time.