

THE LI KIANG PARADOX

Albert G. Wilson, April 7, 2004

The sage Li Kiang lived in the third century B.C.E. near Guilin in Southern China. He is best known for proposing that it is better to consider all philosophes as being coins in the treasury of wisdom than to dispute which philosophy or philosopher might be correct. Each philosophy, even when in error, has contributions to make. To propose any single philosophy or view to supercede others is to impede learning and wisdom. Li Kiang felt that error had fewer disadvantages than dogma. While error was correctable, dogma was not. And in the long run tolerance of many flawed views was superior to dogmatic support of a single view, however errorless that view may be perceived. Li held that without alternatives, understanding could not grow.

Li Kiang's emphasis on alternatives set him in opposition to those who sought unity whether in philosophy or politics. Any unity that was achieved by discarding the pieces that did not fit, was to Li Kiang less useful than an all-inclusive aggregate of pieces including some that could not fit. He felt that wholeness was to be reached through a multiplicity of alternatives, not through an exclusive singleness. How or whether the alternatives fit together was less important to him than having available the abundance of different perspectives. He is quoted as having said, "Our wealth is measured by the number and variety of options available to us."

Li Kiang was probably a contemporary of Hsun tzu¹ (fl 298-238 B.C.E.), but whether they met is inconclusive. Hsun tzu lived in Chou in the north while Li Kiang lived in the south. What is of interest is that Hsun tsu's denunciation of all philosophers² as being obsessed with one viewpoint or aspect, paradoxically included denouncing Li Kiang for being obsessed with alternatives. "Li Kiang is obsessed with alternatives and does not understand the importance of selection. Who thinks only of alternatives renders the Way (Tao) wayless." Perhaps this curious paradox relegated Li Kiang to obscurity.³

Actually the paradox centers on whether Heaven [T'ien] rules or Nature [Chi] rules. If it is T'ien, then there is only Tao, The Way. But if the world is not predetermined, is open, and humans participate in its destiny, then there are multiple ways, not just one. But Hsun Tzu was right in criticizing Li Kiang for having nothing to say about selection. "Have you no criteria for preferences among the multiple ways?" But maybe Li Kiang thought selection was not necessary. All the options should be pursued.

Although Hsun Tzu could criticize Li Kiang for his obsession with alternatives, he could praise Kung Fu Tzu for studying all doctrines, forming his own school, and being open to correction. This seems somewhat contradictory unless we note that the goal of Kung Fu Tzu was to establish a school and this required selections, while Li Kiang wanted only alternatives, no selections.

It is Li Kiang's obsession with alternatives that makes him of interest to us today.

¹Hsun Tzu, not to be confused with Sun Tzu, author of "The Art of War" (ca. 500 B.C.E.)

²Hsun Tzu made an exception with Kung Fu Tzu (Confucius). He felt that only Kung Fu Tzu of all philosophers was free of obsession.

³Li Kiang could have accused Hsun Tzu of being obsessed with obsession.