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Li Fang-Kuei (1902–1989)

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Fang-Kuei Li was one of the foremost scholars of Thai and Sino-Tibetan studies and a major contributor to Amerind studies. Born in China, he was one of the early scholars sent to the United States to study. He had developed an interest in language while learning English, Latin, and German as part of his studies in China, and so he decided to study linguistics in the United States. In 1924, he went to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, receiving his B.A. 2 years later, then moved to the University of Chicago, where he received his M.A. and Ph.D., studying with Edward Sapir, Leonard Bloomfield, and Carl Darling Buck.

Sapir had the greatest influence on Li. From Sapir he learned phonetics, field methods, and about the languages of Native Americans. Sapir also encouraged Li to read articles on East and Southeast Asian languages. It was Sapir’s influence that led Li to take up Thai, Sino-Tibetan and Amerind linguistics. In 1927, Sapir took Li to California to do field work. At first they worked together, but then Sapir sent Li off on his own to work on the Mattole language. There were only two Mattole Indians left at that time, and Li’s notes, which he later used as the basis of his Ph.D. dissertation, are the only record of that language.

With Bloomfield, Li studied Germanic linguistics and the methods of text analysis. With Carl Darling Buck, Li studied Indo-European linguistics, especially Greek and Latin. Buck also got Li a fellowship to Harvard in 1928, where Li studied Sanskrit and

Tibetan for 6 months. Then, with letters of recommendation from Franz Boas, Li went to Europe to visit linguists there, such as Walter Simon.

After returning to North America in 1929, Li spent 3 months living on an island in the middle of the McKenzie River north of the Arctic Circle doing fieldwork on the Hare language.

On his return to China, he was invited to become a member of the Academia Sinica, where he worked on the Chinese dialects on Hainan Island, and also continued to work on Tibetan.

Li married Ying Hsu in 1932 and later had three children, Lindy, Peter, and Annie.

In 1933, Li went to Thailand to learn Classical Thai, then went to Guangxi to study the Tai languages there. This led to some of his major contributions. Li returned to the United States in 1937 to be a visiting professor at Yale for 2 years, then spent the war years in southwest China, the years 1943–1946 as a visiting professor at the relocated Yanjing University in Chengdu. In 1946, he returned again to the United States, accepting visiting professorships at Harvard, for 2 years, and Yale, for 1 year. In 1949, Li accepted a job at the University of Washington in Seattle and stayed there until he retired in 1969, then accepted an appointment at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where he stayed until 1974, retiring a second time. Though he retired from teaching, Li continued doing research and publishing. In all he authored nine books and over 100 articles.

In addition to his academic accomplishments, Li was a talented painter in Chinese and Western watercolors. He played the Chinese flute well, and enjoyed singing and teaching Kunqu, the musical drama of the Ming dynasty.

See also: Bloomfield, Leonard (1887–1949); Sapir, Edward (1884–1939); Sino-Tibetan Languages; Tai Languages.

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Liberia: Language Situation

Editorial Team

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Liberia, one of Africa's oldest republics, has a population of 3 390 635 (July 2004 estimate) over an area of 111 370 sq km. It is located in western Africa, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone in a terrain that consists of

mostly flat to rolling coastal plains, rising to rolling plateau and low mountains in the northeast. It shares land borders with Guinea (563 km), Ivory Coast (716 km), and Sierra Leone (306 km).

Although Liberia was founded by freed American slaves, 95% of the population is now composed of indigenous Africans of the ethnic groups Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru, Grebo, Mano, Krahn, Gola, Gbandi, Loma, Kisi, Vai, Dei, Bella, Mandingo, and Mende. The descendants of slaves only make up the remaining 5% of the population, equally divided between the Americo-Liberians (descendants of American slaves) and the Congo People (descendants of Caribbean slaves).

The official language is English, although only 20% of the population speak it. Most Liberians speak one or more of the 29 African languages spoken in the country, a few of which are written and are used in correspondence. All languages of Liberia are Niger-Congo languages, and they belong to one of three groups within that family: Mande, Kru, or Mel (Table 1).

Literacy rates have shown great improvement in the last decade, with a total adult literacy of 57.5% in 2003 compared to 25% in 1989. Of this, 73.3% are men and 41.6% women.

See also: Kru Languages; Mande Languages; Niger-Congo Languages.

Language Maps (Appendix 1): Map 18.

Table 1 Number of speakers according to language

Group	Language	Number of speakers (1991 est.)
Mel	Gola	99 300
	Kisi	115 000
Mande	Bandi	70 000
	Dan	200 000
	Kpelle	487 400
	Loma	141 800
	Mano	185 000
	Manya	45 400
	Mende	1970
Kru	Vai	89 500
	Bassa	347 600
	Dewoin	8100
	Gbii	5600
	Glaro-Twabo	3900
	Grebo dialects	193 200
	Klao	184 000
	Krahn dialects	47 800
	Kuwaa	12 800
	Sapo	31 600
Tajuasohn	9600	