

Lǐ 李 Surname Totem

The Lǐ李 surname totem displays an ancient pictographic form of the character Li李 with a tree at the top and a child underneath. On the lower right of this character is an image of a tiger facing the child and tree with its mouth open and teeth showing. A single piece of fruit seems to be growing near the top of the tree. The motto of the totem is 食李救命，指树为姓 Shí lǐ jiù mìng, Zhǐ shù wèi xìng (Eat plums to save life, Appoint the (plum) tree as the surname.)



The ancestor of people with the Lǐ李 surname is Gāo Yáo 皋陶 who was the Minister of Law during the reign of Emperor Shùn and the early stages of the Xia Dynasty (2070-1600 BC). In ancient times there was a tribal union called Jiǔ Lí 九黎 and more than 3000 years ago Lí 黎 meant tiger. The tribal name of the Jiǔ Lí people was Lǐ李 which is a homophone of Lí 黎.

The Lǐ李 totem comprises an image of a tiger, wood (or tree) and a child, the tiger represents Gāo Yáo's ancestor Shào Hào 少昊; wood represents Gāo Yáo's totem the Xuán Niǎo 玄鸟 or Xuán Bird which has been identified with the swallow. The child is the Xuán Niǎo's egg symbolizing offspring and children. The Lǐ李 surname totem therefore symbolizes the offspring of the White Tiger Shào Hào (白虎少昊 Bái Hǔ Shào Hào). The White Tiger is also a directional animal representing the West and the element Metal.

According to some accounts Shào Hào 少昊 reigned from 2598 BC to 2525 BC and was a son of the Yellow Emperor Huáng Dì 黄帝 (reigned 2696—2598 BC). Shào Hào is said to have been born in Qūfǔ 曲阜 (Shandong Province) and to have established his capital there. His nephew Zhuān Xū 顓琐 helped him govern the country. The virtues and abilities of Fú Xī 伏羲 (Tài Hào 太昊) were passed down to him and that is why he took the name Shào Hào (Tài 太 means "senior" and Shào 少 means "junior"). Shào Hào belonged to the Phoenix culture which at the time coexisted with the Dragon culture. When he was born five phoenixes of different colours flew in the sky and this was thought to be the origin of the five colours (azure, red, yellow, white and black). He was a descendant of the tribe of Xī Hé 羲和 the mother of the 10 sun birds (Tài Yáng Niǎo 太阳鸟) which lived in the Fú Sāng Tree 扶桑树 in the East.

Another version of the origin of the Lǐ李 surname is as follows . Lǐ李 is a branch of the ancient ancestral name Yíng 嬴 and those with the surname Lǐ李 are descended from Emperor Zhuān Xū 顓琐 who was a grandson of the Yellow Emperor Huáng Dì 黄帝. He was born in Dì Qiū 帝丘 (today's Pú Yáng 濮阳县 in Henan Province) and he reigned from 2514 BC to 2437 BC. His father was Chāng Yì 昌意, the second son of the Yellow Emperor and his mother was Chāng Pū 昌仆. When Zhuān Xū was 15 years old he assisted Shào Hào 少昊 and at the age of 20 he became emperor. He lived beyond the age of 90 and the famous poet Qū Yuán 屈原 is one of his descendants.

Zhuān Xū set up the boundaries of his kingdom, established laws of marriage and banned the Wū Jiāo 巫教 religion. More importantly, he divided the year into four seasons and 24 solar terms and was given the title Lì Zōng 历宗 (Originator of the Calendar).

About a thousand years on from the time of Gāo Yáo, his descendant called Lǐ Zhēng 理征 gave advice to the Shang Dynasty Emperor Zhòu Wáng 纣王 (reigned 1075-1046 BC) also known as Dì Xīn 帝辛 and the latter became very angry and had Lǐ Zhēng killed. However his son Lǐ Lìzhēn 理利贞 escaped to the ruins of Yī Hòu 伊侯之墟 and ate plums to save his life.

Lǐ李 meaning plum, and having the same sound as Lǐ理, then became the surname of his descendants who settled in Kǔ County 苦县 of Henan Province. The philosopher Lǎo Zi 老子 (Lǐ Er 李耳) had the surname Lǐ李 and was an 11th generation descendant of Lǐ Lìzhēn 理利贞. In the Qin Dynasty the people with the Lǐ李 surname lived in the Gansu and Shaanxi areas. Lǐ李 was the surname of the emperors of the Tang Dynasty which was founded by Lǐ Yuan 李渊 in 618 AD. 20 Tang emperors bore the surname Lǐ and they freely bestowed their surname on favoured government officials, generals and even on members of non-Chinese ethnic groups within the Tang Empire. Some Tibetans, Uyghurs, Persians and Jews also used the name Lǐ李. Today 93 million people in China have the surname Lǐ李 which is second in number only to Wang 王 with 95 million people.

Tiexia's Chinese name is Lǐ Tiě-xiá 李铁侠. Her surname Lǐ李 means Plum, Tiě铁 means Iron and xiá侠 means Chivalrous as in the word Wǔ Xiá 武侠 a swordsman who performs the chivalrous acts of a knight in drawing his sword and rescuing a victim of injustice.

Tiexia's father's name is Lǐ Pǐn-qīng 李品清. He was born in 1932 but his birth registration shows 1936 as the year of birth. He had three older brothers and one older sister. One brother in 2017 is now 94 years old. The Lǐ family had a farm in the Liao River Valley northwest of Shenyang. 300,000 Japanese colonists were brought to Manchuria (1931-1945) and Tiexia's father played with Japanese children when he was young. He can say many things in Japanese and told us that the Japanese were friendly. His family farm was not expropriated but if the Japanese had won the war they planned to bring in 5 million new settlers which would have caused the loss of a lot more Chinese land.

Tiexia's grandfather was Lǐ Hóng-rú 李洪儒. He was a calligrapher and died when Tiexia's father was 6 years old. His wife had no personal name but was known as Lǐ Yán Shì 李闫氏 which means Lǐ née Yán (Her father's surname was Yán and her husband's name was Lǐ). She was born in 1889 and died in the 1960s. She was 43 years old when Tiexia's father was born. She became a Catholic when the Catholic Church was handing out free food to converts because at this time many Chinese were short of food and lived in extreme poverty.

Tiexia's great grandfather's name was Lǐ Wǔ-chén 李午臣. He was born in a village near Lanzhou City in Gansu Province. He was a minor Qīng Dynasty official and was financially well off. He migrated to Liaoning Province but we don't know why. He died at about the age of 50 possibly because of opium addiction.

Tiexia's mother's name is Zhāng Xiù-lán 张秀兰 and she was born in 1939. Her family had previously migrated from Shandong Province to Shenyang.

Tiexia's mother's father was Zhāng Róng-nián 张荣年 and Tiexia's mother's mother was Pān Yù-zhī 潘玉芝.

John O Goodman 16 Feb 2017