

History of Chinese Names

The Chinese have had surnames long before the period of the Three Emperors and Five Kings, that is, during the time when recognition was given only to one's mother and not one's father. Hence, the Chinese character for surname is made up of two individual characters----one meaning woman and one meaning to give birth. That is to say, the surnames of the early Chinese followed the maternal line. Before the three dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou (2140-256 BC), the people in China were already having surnames (Xing) and clan-names (Shi). The surnames originated from the name of the village in which one live or the family to which one belonged, while the clan-name derived from the name of the territory or the title granted, sometimes posthumously, by the emperor to a noble for an achievement. Hence, only nobles had surnames as well as clan-names.

A man and a woman of the same clan-name could marry each other but they could not if they were of the same surname.

This is because the Chinese had discovered, long ago, that marriages of close relatives would be detrimental to future generations.

In any solemn ceremony or important celebration, the Chinese have their clan-names written on lanterns which are hung high in a prominent place, such as the main entrance of the house.

As a clan-name indicates the ancestral home, it is also carved on a man's tombstone to indicate a hope that he will return there.

This went on for 800 years until the rule of Emperor Tang Tai Zong (627 AD). Gao Shi Lian, a government official, made a survey and found that there were a total of 593 different surnames.

He then wrote and published a book called "Annal of Surnames" which became a reference for selecting qualified personnel as government officials and for arranging marriages.

The book, "Surnames of a Hundred Families", which was popular in China during the old days, was written more than 1,000 years ago during the Northern Song Dynasty (960 AD).

It records 438 surnames of which 408 are single-word surnames and 30 were double-word surnames.

According to the latest statistics from China, Chinese with the surname Zhang alone number more than 100 million, making it probably the surname which the most number of the Chinese have.

Another set of statistics compiled in 1977 reveals that the number of the Chinese with the first 10 major surnames make up 40% of the Chinese population. The 10 major Chinese surnames are: Zhang, Wang, Li, Zhao, Chen, Yang, Wu, Liu, Huang and Zhou.

Below are the next 10 major surnames. The Chinese with these surnames make up over 10% of the Chinese population: Xu, Zhu, Lin, Sun, Ma, Gao, Hu, Zheng, Guo and Xiao.

The number of the Chinese in the third category of 10 major surnames make up just about 10% of the population:
Xie, He, Xu, Song, Shen, Luo, Han, Deng, Liang and Ye.

The following 15 surnames form the fourth largest group of the Chinese surnames are:
Fang, Cui, Cheng, Pan, Cao, Feng, Wang, Cai, Yuan, Lu, Tang, Qian, Du, Peng and Lu.

A total of 70% of the Chinese population have one of the surnames above. The surnames of the remaining 30% are comparatively rare. Some of these surnames are:
Mao, Jiang, Bai, Wen, Guan, Liao, Miao and Chi.