

European family names are almost invariably derived from occupation, location, characteristic or patronymic. This haphazard approach has produced several million Western surnames. This contrasts greatly with East Asia where a 1990 study showed that 200 family names accounted for 96% of the population with the other 4% having less than another 500 names! Obviously there are an awful lot of people with the same surname. Family names go back in China over 2500 years, long before the average European bothered with such niceties. Because of the feudal nature of early Chinese society a system of two surnames evolved, the family name and the clan name, *shi* and *xing* respectively. The xing names were the different members of the royal family, in essence the tribal overlord. As society became more complex so families adopted a shi name to show their status within the clan.

Any study of Chinese surnames by the West is complicated by the fact that the Chinese use characters rather than an alphabet, thus it is difficult to have a literal translation. Furthermore every region of China has its own dialect which has developed into almost unique languages, yet all are based on the same Chinese characters. This, for the lay person like myself, explains why John Woo, the director, and Jonathan Ngo, the author, both have the same family name. In some instances you could almost measure the power of a particular clan by the number of people with the name. The Kuang family were generals and statesmen of great importance during the Han dynasty but with the advent of the Ming era they went into decline. The people of the Kuang home province of Henan had adopted the name but, without court influence, became poorer and joined the diaspora. Today 5 million people are spread throughout the world with the surname Kuang, Kwong or Fong (including Hiram Fong the only Chinese-American to serve in the Senate and run for President.), all variations, but very few except for a village or two, in China itself.

Somewhere about 1000 A.D., during the early Song dynasty, somebody decided to make a list of 'acceptable' names. Written in the form of a rhyming poem with 8 characters per line (sounds rather a boring concept to Western ears, a little like reciting a telephone directory), this treatise became known as the Book of a Hundred Family Surnames. Maybe the author was trying to project a snappy image as it actually contained 411 names, an ironic number considering. Since expanded to 504 names this is where all Chinese names have traditionally come from. The first four names, unsurprisingly, are Zhao, Qian, Sun and Li, derived, respectively, from the Song Emperors family name, the King and Queen of Wuyue and the King of Tang. The surname Li is now the most common family name in the world, comprising nearly 10% of China's population. Often Anglicized (more correctly, Romanized, as English uses the Latin alphabet) as Lee, remember Bruce Lee in Enter the Dragon, the name is also Medieval English, denoting someone who lived by a meadow.

Just to make things even more complicated there were periods of name taboo. Generally these occurred during the reign of an Emperor who decreed that no-one could have the same name as him. During the reign of Liu Zhuang an Imperial decree forced anyone with the surname Zhuang to change it to Yan. Conversely, during the Tang Dynasty, the Emperors bestowed the name Li (the family name of the Tang royalty) upon senior officials as a form of state honor. The names do have meanings, they are represented by a Chinese character (in some instances two characters, though this is becoming rare). The name Li means plum; Chan, as in Jackie Chan, is Cantonese for Chen which means stale, not a flattering name. Mao, as in the revered Chairman, means hair or fur, presumably his ancestors were not balding.

Most people probably know that Chinese names are written in the reverse order from Westerners. Jackie Chan was born in [Hong Kong](#) and named Chan Kong Sang, which, oddly enough, means Chan born in Hong Kong. If a Chinese take a Western name, such as Jet Lee, then they adopt the Western order whereas Yao Ming, the famous [NBA](#) player is actually Mr. Yao. There are exceptions, of course, Yo-Yo Ma the world famous cellist, is Mr. Ma, and the Hong Kong politician Martin Lee Chu-Ming is actually Mr. Martin (Western name) Chu-Ming (Chinese given name) Lee (family name). Another filip to chaos is the old Chinese custom of a rich bride and poor(er) groom keeping the bride's family name. This custom, known as *ru zhui* was intended as a means for influential

families without a male heir to continue the family name; the grooms family probably felt that the rise in status was worth a name.

The Chinese characters are used throughout East Asia and thus it is no surprise to find the same names in Korean and Vietnamese but with wholly different pronunciations and thus Westernized form. In Korea there are roughly 250 surnames, but 5 of them account for well over half of the population. The five most common family names are Kim, Lee (with variants like Yi and Rhee), Park, Chung (often Anglicised to Young) and Choi. These are all tribal names often identifying which part of the peninsular the family originated in. Vietnamese family names are even more limited, Ngyuen is the surname of an estimated 40% of Vietnamese! Similar to the Chinese the top three names were all Kings at one time or another and were adopted so that families could show their loyalty. In fact the Vietnamese, like Americans, have a family name, a middle name and a given name; unlike their Western counterparts, however, the middle name was almost always Thi for women and Van for men, there has been a slight broadening of the selection in recent years but the list is still very short. Given the similarity of their middle and family names it is not surprising that Vietnamese are customarily addressed by their given name, for example Ngyuen Tan Dung is addressed as Mr. Dung; makes sense to me.