

WINDOW TO CHINA

CHINESE SURNAMES

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There are over 280 million people in the United States who together bear thousands of surnames or last names. American surnames are more associated with individual identification rather than history or tradition, even though many people have their genealogical story to share. However in China, a country with more than 1.3 billion people, less than a few hundred names are available. Each name carries its own unique history and meaning.

The most common Chinese names number at about 200. An additional 500 names which is less common and belongs to less than 1% of the overall population have also been identified and recognized. The origins of the Chinese names are not clear. Most likely it is related to agriculture activities. The use of the Chinese surnames was discovered back to 5000 years ago and the most commonly used surnames were recognized three thousand years ago and was called “Bai Jia Xing”—100 Chinese Surnames.

Every family group with the same surname created its own middle name system to distinguish the order of generation. Therefore it is not uncommon when two perfect strangers who discover that they share the same exact last name can tell easily by studying their middle names if they are same generation, or one maybe the uncle to the other.

Like many other cultures around the world, the male has the responsibility and authority to carry and continue his family name. In a culture of a huge population with less than a few hundred surnames, having a boy to carry family's name become an obligation for a couple, particularly the father. For a couple who is able to give birth to many sons, they not only bring honor to their ancestors so the smoke of incense on their ancestor's tomb will continue, but also bring good fortune to their future. A father will be regarded weak if he has no son and he would feel shame for discontinuing the ancestral incense smoke. Although this last-name tradition is changing in modern China, it nonetheless is still one of the contributing factor to the abandonment of many girls at their infancy.

Every children adopted has her own last name. Most likely these last names are not her real name because child abandonment is a crime in China and, therefore, her birth parent do not want to be identified and arrested. In most cases the orphanage principals becomes the name granter. In most orphanages, all the children's last names are always the same. Some other orphanages use different name for new coming children every few years.

