

[RIDDLES OF KOREAN CULTURE (5)] What's in a Name?

Surnames: Microcosmic icon of Korea's Confucian order

Ask any Korean person about the history of his or her clan based on surname, and he or she would proudly give you a detailed account of the origin of the clan, the progenitor and prominent historical figures from the clan.

The pride Koreans take in their family heritage is so intense that they would swear on, more than anything else, their surnames, saying, "If I am lying, I would change my last name." Likewise, the study of the nature of Korean surnames reveals some of the most interesting aspects of Korean culture and history.

Currently, there are about 270 last names in Korea, but the five most popular - Kim, Lee (Yi), Park (Pak), Choi (Choe), and Chong (Jung, Chung) - make up more than 50 percent of the population, according to recent national censuses. (Those in parentheses refer to different variations of the same last name, depending on the Roman transcriptions.)

For instance, the last name Kim makes up 22 percent, which is equivalent to almost 10 million people, while those surnamed with Lee account for 14 percent. On the other hand, there are rare family names that number less than 1,000, such as Pung or Sop.

The scene in the North is not too different from that in the South, experts believe, in light of the 1930 census conducted by the Japanese colonial government.

However, having the same last name does not always mean that persons share the same blood heritage. For over 1,000 years, Koreans have maintained the unique system of using their regional bases as an important way to differentiate their identities.

For example, there are 285 regional origins for the Kims, such as the Kyongju Kim clan and Kimhae Kim clan. There are 241 regional bases, including Chonju and Kwangju, for the Lees, 128 for Park and 127 for Choi, among others.

Marriage between people with the same last name and place of origin has been traditionally forbidden, but today's legal definition of inter-clan marriage is narrowed to those within second cousins in order to minimize the potential constraints incurred by the traditional ban.

Surname history

The modern custom of referring to all Koreans by their full names is a recent development less than 100 years old in Korean history, and the surname issue did not take center stage until the early 10th century.

It was around the Christian era when the Chinese practice of using surnames was first introduced to ancient kingdoms on the Korean Peninsula.

During the Three Kingdoms period, which lasted until the late seventh century, using surnames was a privilege given to a limited number of social groups such as royal clans and the aristocracy. Each of the ancient three kingdoms had, at most, 10 surnames such as Ko for the royal clans for Koguryo and Paekche, and Park, Sok and Kim for the three different royal clans of Silla.

There are more people referred to without surnames in the official account of the history of the Three Kingdoms, "Samguksagi," than those referred to only by first names.

King Taejo, launching the Koryo Dynasty in the early 10th century, bestowed his loyal followers with last names and distinguished their surnames by their regional bases, giving birth to the modern "ponkwon" system. Ponkwon refers to the regional distinction of surnames.

He also condemned a band of rebellious strongmen in the present-day Mokchon area of South Chungchong Province by giving them "animal" surnames of pig, horse, elephant and cow, and graced other loyal subjects by allowing them to share his own surname, Wang.

By the mid-11th century, the surname issue had become more conspicuous, as evinced in a court decree that forbade people without a last name from taking the state civil service exam.

During the Choson Dynasty (1392-1910), most commoners, except for slaves and outcasts, had surnames, as registered in period tax documents and conscription lists.

Listed in an annex to the official history of King Sejong in the mid-15th century are 265 surnames, while those discussed in a late 18th century document on lifestyle total 298, including an array of defunct, archaic surnames of that time.

Toward the end of the dynasty, a growing number of affluent commoners and entrepreneurs, who belonged to the lower echelons of the social hierarchy, secretly bought the status of nobility and adopted "dignitary" yangban surnames.

The universal use of surnames owed much to the royal edict for national registration proclaimed in 1909 by the crumbling Choson court.

Adopted under the influence of the Japanese imperialists who sought to control Korea more effectively, the monumental decree required all Korean nationals to register their full names and regional origins. At that time, those without surnames often adopted the surnames of their masters or were simply assigned one by recording officials.

Surname dynamics

Historians argue that the Korean surname structure offers a convincing comparative tool to piece together the nature of traditional Korean society.

The intense pride of clan identity was incurred under the Confucian system of Choson, but there is more to explain in other surname dynamics of Korea, anthropologist Kim Yong-un notes.

Compared to China and Japan, Korea has a far smaller number of surnames, among which the "big four" surnames - Kim, Lee, Park and Choi - dominate the scene. The extremely populous China hosts countless surnames, and Japan is home to some 132,000 surnames, a figure that is beyond comparison with Korea, even when one takes into account that its population is twice that of Korea.

Kim contends that the big four surnames were adopted by commoners in the course of Korean history since these surnames were simply perceived to be of blue blood.

The Kim and Park clans were royal clans of the ancient Silla Kingdom, while the Choson Dynasty was ruled by the Lee clan, even though they were from Chonju. A Choi clan also established a military government and ruled Koryo for 60 years in the 13th century.

"Under the strict social hierarchy in which only influential families were treated with respect, people of lower social classes may have wanted to cover up their backgrounds by adopting noble family names," says the anthropologist Kim in his recent cultural essay collection, "Let's Talk About History and Future of Korea, China and Japan."

While last names in China and Japan were mostly picked up based on natural milestones or lifestyles, or were created under historical contexts, the Korean surname was based on admiration and coveting of the status that the name represented, Kim argues, commenting on the trademark social quality of saving face in Korea.

In this respect, 130-plus Korean last names were adopted from China, the role model of Choson, while last names of other foreign origins are short of 10.

Kim goes on to explain the absence of Korean surnames derived from professions, a practice common in the West and Japan, from social and cultural perspectives.

"Since Choson's orthodox Confucian order regarded commerce and manufacturing with the least respect, it would not have been plausible for people to adopt surnames indicative of their menial professions," Kim contends.

By Choe Yong-shik