



The History of Family Names in Korea



Unique Concept of Family Names

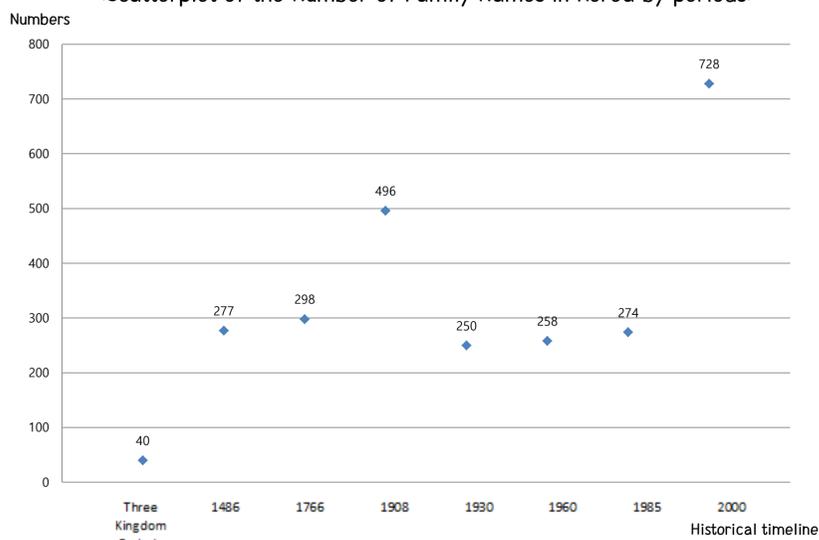
Korea has a unique tradition when it comes to family names. It is that these family names are mostly in one syllables—like Kim, Jung, Park, Lim. According to the Ministry of Statistics, there are currently about 5582 family names existent in Korea. Unlike in many other countries where a family name is only shared by the members of one family, families in Korea share surnames according to the clans of which their ancestors were part of. These clans are based on regions, and so, it is very likely for people to have the same last names. For instance, one of the most popular family names, Kim, is shared by 335 family clans. (ex) Gyeongju Kim, Gaypeong Kim, Kimhae Kim

Objective

As students from an international school, we were exposed to various global communities. As we interacted and communicated with students of other nationalities, we noticed a uniqueness in Korean names, as our family names were mostly in one syllables and shared by many families of the same clan. Foreigners, on the other hand, each had different surnames, and rarely had the same family name. From this, we discovered that each of our surnames play a part in forming the “Korean identity,” as last names indicate our home region, family lineage, and tradition. Observing the rise & fall of the number of Korean family names across the chronology of Korean history, we inquired 1) whether historical events had an influence on the number of Korean surnames, and 2) if so, which events played a part in creating/destroying our surnames.

Analysis Pt. 1

<Scatterplot of the Number of Family Names in Korea by periods>



Reference: <http://www.rootsinfo.co.kr>

► Using the data given, we have constructed a scatterplot on the number of family names throughout the timeline of Korean history. By analyzing the overall pattern of this scatterplot, we will understand the relationship between the number of Korean last names and historical periods.

► The graph shows...

Direction: In general, the overall pattern moves from lower right to upper left. It shows a clear direction, indicating that as time passed, the number of surnames in Korea mostly increased. Therefore, we can say there is a *positive association*.

Form: The form of the relationship is slightly curved. That is, the number of family names increased as time flowed.

Strength: The relationship is moderately strong. The exact number of family names tend to have similar mean number of family names. Still, the graph has a strong *outlier* in 1908 when the number of reported names soared up due to a revised census registration law and then plunged in the 1930s.

► However, because history is a field of studying the flow of time, it is impossible to calculate the exact correlation value r . However, the points in the scatterplot are not random, and we can definitely see a pattern—thus, we can interpret that there is a **strong correlation** between time and number of family names.

Analysis Pt. 2



So, which of the historical events played a part in changing the number of family names in Korea?

Let's now look more closely at the fluctuations in the graph. We can notice three major changes. From the 'Three Kingdom Periods' to the 20th century, the number of family names increases drastically. But, when it reaches 1908, the number declines abruptly, and only starts to increase when it reaches the 1930s. It keeps on rising steadily, and by the late 20th century, and early 21st century, the number of family names grows at an exponential rate.

1. Wang Geon (Koryeo Dynasty)

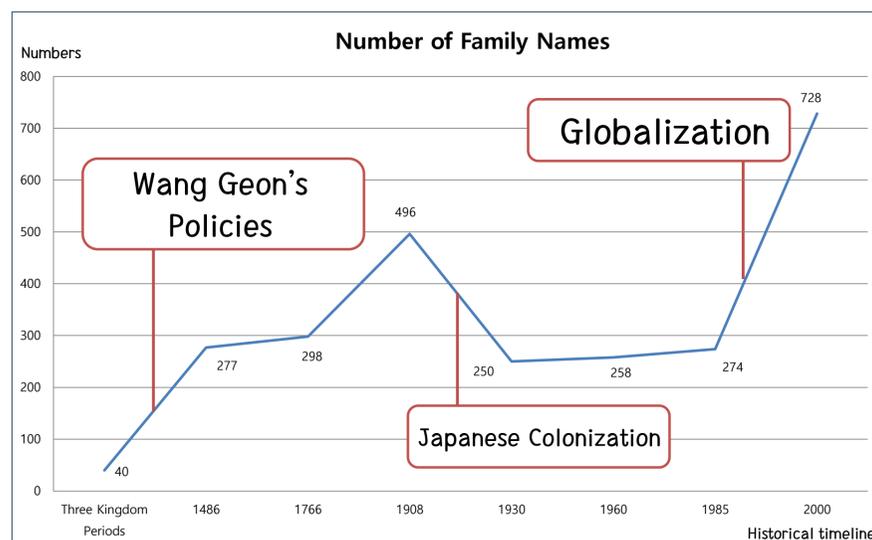
After successfully finding the Koryeo Dynasty, Wang Geon, the first king of Koryeo, officially bestowed family names to close contributors and local powers. By doing so, Wang Geon aimed to integrate and take charge of powerful bureaucratic forces. As a result, the number of family names in Korea increased by **five** times the reported number during the three kingdom periods (in which only kings had last names). In 1055, King Munjong encouraged even ordinary civilians to have family names, and it was then that the usage of family names became universalized.

2. Japanese Colonization of Korea

Japan tried to viciously annihilate Koreans; the name-changing policy (known as the Changshi Name Project) was one of the major projects that the Japanese leaders forced on the civilians. Koreans were forced to change their names to Japanese names, resulting in a steep decline in the number of family names during the early 20th century till the late 1930s, when Korea earned independence from Japan.

3. Globalization

The 21st-century opened up a globalized era where a lot of new family names emerged. Naturalized citizens from China still use their family names in Chinese letters but pronounce them in Korean. 3600 family names not in Chinese letters, such as McQuire, Suzuki, Johnson, and Mung, were reported over the past 15 years. These all added up to the rapid increase in the 2000 census, and were reported to be about 728 family names. In the 2015 census, due to the great sum of people that returned or moved to Korea, the number of family names was reported to have reached 5582, approximately 8 times more than that of in 2000.



Conclusion

- ✓ We can observe a positive, strong association between the historical timeline and the number of family names in Korea.
- ✓ Three historical events played a major role in the fluctuations of the number of Korean family names: Wang Geon's political policies, Japanese oppression (Changshi Name Project) during the colonial era, and globalization from the late 20th century and onto the 21st century.

Limitations: There may be other factors that could have played an influence in changing the number of family names throughout our historic timeline, apart from these historic events. However, our analysis cannot include such factors, as it limits us to only a historic approach.