[page 1]

**Seoul: Founding the New Capital**

**Yon-ung Kwon**

INTRODUCTION

In 1394 Seoul became the capital city of Korea, when the Choson dynasty moved its capital from Kaesong. In 1994, the city of Seoul commemorates the 600th anniversary of this historic event. Now it seems quite appropriate to look back upon the founding of Seoul that took place six centuries ago.

Let me first outline the history of the Seoul area before it became the capital city. We know that people lived in this area as far back as five thousand years ago. The neolithic relics in Amsa-dong testify to this, and the recent excavations of two dozen sites show that bronze-age people thronged into this area in the millennium preceding the Christian era.

From the Christian era to the seventh century, the area became the object of contest among the Three Kingdoms. Whoever controlled the area controlled the entire peninsula. That was the case, first with Koguryo, and then with Paekje. Finally Silla seized it and went on to destroy the other two kingdoms. Unified Silla made this area one of its nine provincial centers.

In the Koryo period (918-1392),the Seoul area remained an important provincial center. It was called Hanyang, meaning literally north of the Hanriver. Its symbolic importance increased as Koryo made Hanyang its southern capital in 1067, and after that Koryo kings frequented the town and remained for a couple of months each year.

Before we go into the Choson period, let me explain the word Seoul. Seoul is a common noun, literally meaning the capital city, and it became the official designation of the city only after 1948. Hansong was its official designation in the Choson period, but people preferred the old designation, Hanyang. I will use Seoul most of the time, and by this I mean the old Seoul, the small area surrounded by walls. [page 2]

The main body of this paper is divided into three parts: 1. selection,2. construction, and 3. population. First, I will discuss why the new dynasty decided to move its capital,and how it selected the new site. Then I will outline the construction of the new capital over three decades. Finally,I will describe what kind of people lived in the new capital.

SELECTION OF THE SITE

In 1392,Yi Songgye overthrew the Koryo dynasty in a military coup and founded the Choson dynasty. He ascended the throne at the palace in Kaesong, the capital city of the Koryo dynasty. Within a month, he announced his decision to move the capital to Hanyang,thenceforward to be known as Seoul. Obviously he was anxious to leave Kaesong immediately, and he had good reasons.

First of all, he was an outsider, a military general from the northeastern frontier, and had no power base in the Kaesong area. Actually its residents remained loyal to the Koryo dynasty and hostile to the new regime. Besides, the founder of the new dynasty was a true believer in geomancy. He believed that Koryo declined and fell because it had used up the geomantic power of its capital, so it was mandatory that the new dynasty find another center, rich in geomantic power,and exploit its geomantic resources.

I think I had better explain the key word here. Geomancy refers to divination by means of geographic features. In China, it refers to the esoteric knowledge of identifying good and bad places. This is based on the belief that geographic features determine people’s fortunes. One can exploit the good influence of land by building a house or a tomb on it. The Koryo people extended the idea to the sphere of dynastic fortunes. The geomantic influence of Kaesong was not enough to guarantee the prosperity and longevity of the dynasty,so they developed two additional capitals, the western capital, P’yongyang, and the southern capital, Hanyang. Each year, the king was to spend four months in each of the these capitals. In those days geomancy was a very serious business, and to some extent, I believe, it still is.

In short, two factors hastened the transfer of the capital: political and geomantic. The transfer was, however, much delayed. For one thing, most officials were quite settled in Kaesong and restive because of the troublesome relocation. To some extent,they sabotaged the royal wish, but they did not want it to seem as if they were indifferent to the security of the new dynasty, so the king was able to override their lukewarm opposition easily. [page 3]

Then a geomantic debate further complicated the matter. A geomancer argued that he had found a capital site better than Hanyang. The king personally went to the site near Mt. Keryong, and found its geographic features closer to the geomantic ideal, so he ordered the construction of a palace. The work was carried out for ten months in 1393.

The King’s Confucian officials did not like this new place and reminded him of its shortcomings. Unlike Seoul, its location was not in the center of the Korean peninsula. In terms of transportation and communication, it was an out-of-the-way place. Besides,it was too close to the west coast and thus vulnerable to the pillage of Japanese pirates, but the king was not dissuaded. Then the prime minister pointed out that the area had crucial defects in geomantic terms. Under scrutiny, his criticism proved correct. The king abandoned the area abruptly. Then arose another dispute: which of the two was the vital spot in Seoul: what was to become the Kyongbok Palace area or the area where Yonsei University is located today? Finally, in the tenth month of the third year (1394), the king moved the site of his government to Seoul. In the end, conventional wisdom prevailed.

There was, however, another change in 1398. Four years after Seoul became the capital, a tragedy took place. During the power struggle among the sons of the king, Pangwon killed the heir apparent, his half-brother, in the palace. The king retired in disgust, and as a compromise, his oldest son succeeded him. This temporary king, abandoning the blood-stained palace in Seoul, returned to Kaesong. Two years later, he yielded the throne to his brother Pangwon, who became known as T’aejong (1400-1418), and five years later, in 1405,the king left Kaesong for Seoul, for good this time.

Geographically speaking, Seoul has many advantages: 1) It is located in the center of the Korean peninsula, although Kaesong is also close to the center of the peninsula. 2) The Han River runs through the area and provides convenient water transportation. This was crucial for, among other things, the collection of tax revenue. 3) Seoul is protected by mountain ranges. These, together with the Han River, provide natural barriers against would-be invasions. 4) The Seoul basin is large enough to accommodate one million people, and its adjacent areas have an abundance of fertile land.

Geomantically speaking, Seoul seems to satisfy the basic requirements of a propitious site. Rather than going into detail suffice it to point out that Seoul has the combination of essential features: 1) Pugak-san, the guardian mountain to the north; 2) Nak-san, the blue dragon to the east; 3) Inwang-san the white tiger to the west,and 4) Nam-san,the table mountain on the south. The Han River runs to the south,and the whole area is surrounded by four outer [page 4] mountains. In retrospect, the longevity and stability of the dynasty seems to testify to the wisdom of the geomantic decision.

LAYOUT AND CONSTRUCTION

The new capital had to have such essential components as a royal palace, shrines, office buildings, market places, residential areas, roads, and circum- vallation. It took about two decades to build it from scratch. The work proceeded according to a master plan, but there were numerous modifications and additions. I will skip the details and simplify the description, so that we can perceive it in a coherent manner.

The first construction work priority went to the palace and the shrines as they symbolized royal authority and legitimacy, respectively, so Kyongbok Palace was built first along with two shrines, the ancestral shrine and the snnne for the guardian deities of the state (sajik). It took four years, 1394- 1398,and several tens of thousands of laborers to build the palace,which consisted of such buildings as the audience hall, offices, living quarters and surrounding walls and gates. The two shrines were built in 1394.

Ch’angdok Palace, also known as the Secret Gardens, was built by T’aejong. When he returned to Seoul as the king, he did not want to live in Kyongbok Palace were he had had his half-brother murdered, so he ordered the construction of another palace. It took about a year and half, from the summer of 1404 to the winter of 1405. This secondary palace was smaller than Kyongbok Palace but had all of a palace’s essential components.

Circumvallation was crucial to defense in those days, so they set about constructing the city walls when Kyongbok Palace and the shrines had been completed. In early 1396, the government mobilized 120,000 men for 49 days and constructed the ten mile long,15 foot high walls around Seoul. Two thirds of the walls were built with mud and only one third with stone. The idea was to send the peasants back home before the farming season began. In late 1396, 80,000 men were mobilized for 49 days to repair the walls and build the gates,four main gates and four smaller gates. The gate towers had been completed by 1398.

The city walls were reconstructed in 1422, the fourth year of Sejong’s reign. The most important change was that the mud rampart was entirely replaced by stone. For this work, 320,000 men were mobilized for 40 days. The population of Seoul was about 100,000. The height of the walls was also increased by a foot to 16 feet by adding crests on their tops. Another change [page 5] was the relocation of the West Gate to its present site. Patrol roads 15 feet wide were constructed along the walls, both inside and outside.

We have little information about the construction of such important government offices as the state council, the six boards, and the censorate, but their locations are well known. Most of them were concentrated on either side of the road between the Kanghwa-mun and the intersection to the south. Today some of the ‘tong’ names still indicate the presence of certain agencies, e.g. Naeja-dong and Sagan-dong.

On the other hand, we have considerable information about the construction of “department stores.” The government took a keen interest in the regulation of commerce for three reasons: 1) to ensure a stable supply of commodities, 2) to collect taxes,and 3) to regulate prices as well as weights and measures. For this purpose,during a two and a half year period from 1412 to 1414 during T’aejong’s reign the government constructed buildings, stores, and housing along the main roads. The construction work progressed in four stages: 1) from Sinmunno to the Chongno 3-ka intersection, 2) from the Ch’angdok Palace gate to the same intersection, 3) from the Chongno 1-ka intersection to South Gate, and 4) from the Chongno 3-ka intersection to East Gate. The stores were built along either side of the roads, and they were divided into categories and then the areas were allotted to merchant guilds specializing in varied merchandise: textiles (silk, linen, hemp and ramie fabric), fish, rice, paper, ironware, and so forth.

The construction of the new capital, of course, included a network of roads. The major thoroughfare was Chongno, the main road that ran between East Gate and West Gate. Three main branches connected it to the two palaces and South Gate. Secondary and tertiary roads connected all sections of the city. The main road was about 20 meters wide; the secondary roads at least 10 meters wide, and the tertiary roads more than 5 meters wide. There was a drainage system at either side of each road.

The roads were often encroached upon by the houses of powerful people like the royal family, but occasional fires cleared them. A tug of war went on between the city authorities and the encroachers. The only exceptions were the main road and the secondary roads which were marked by public buildings, such as government offices and department stores. Presumably they were in good shape then, far from the poor conditions foreigners witnessed toward the end of the nineteenth century.

Drainage was another important element of city construction. The city was located in a basin, and all the precipitation converged into one stream, Ch’onggye-ch’on, that ran across the city from west to the east. The water [page 6] system was shaped like a fish bone. Whenever Seoul had a torrential rain, the eastern part of the city was flooded, which created a serious problem.

In 1412, T’aejong set about solving these problem once and for all. The work included dredging, widening the stream at bottlenecks, and building up the banks with rocks or timber. There were a dozen wooden bridges crossing the stream, and the king replaced half of them with stone bridges. Altogether, Seoul had eight large bridges and more than sixty smaller ones. The drainage system was improved and completed by King Sejong. This time the work was done little by little over twelve years. It included dredging the main line deeper and also dredging its branches, replacing wooden bridges with stone bridges, and making an additional floodgate through the wall near East Gate. Finally the drainage system was completed and proved to be durable. It remained little changed until the 1950s.

That is how the city of Seoul was built about six centuries ago. The founder of the new dynasty made a master plan and built the most important parts, such as the palaces, the shrines, and the city walls. T’aejong built the other parts, and Sejong completed them. Unfortunately, I can give almost no information about the construction of the many public buildings, such as granaries, storehouses for ice,clothes and weapons, as well as public schools and minor shrines and we know very little about the construction of private houses.

POPULATION

As the construction work progressed, the city’s population increased. We have no data about Seoul’s population before it became the capital city in 1392, but presumably it had about 10,000 residents. By 1428, its population exceeded 100,000. This figure includes the residents in the outskirts of the city, the 4-kilometer-wide ring surrounding the city wall, which was under the jurisdiction of the municipality.

Its population comprised all sorts of people. At the highest echelon were the members of the ruling class, the royal family and the yangban. Seoul had the highest concentration of VIPs, as they naturally gathered at the center of power and wealth. The central government had about 1,000 official positions for ranks from the first to the ninth. Both former and incumbent officials enjoyed the privileges of the yangban class. This was the case with their family members down to their grandchildren. Altogether the ruling class constituted 10 to 15 percent of the total population. [page 7]

The privileged class naturally occupied the best residential areas of Seoul. The better-off members resided in the northern section, Pukch’on (northern village),between the two royal palaces. Located at the foot of the northern mountain,this area was not only sunny in winter but also well drained and ventilated during the rainy summer. The poor yangban members lived at the foot of Mt. Namsan which, was not sunny in winter, but it was dry in summer. The yangban members did not necessarily live in these two areas. We know of certain state councillors who lived outside the walls.

As the elite of medieval Korean society, members of the yangban class had all the privileges. They held government posts; they owned landed estates and serfs; they preserved and reinforced their social status through marriage ties; they could afford and did receive proper educations; they had privileges in residence and garments as well. Only the yangban were allowed to live in large houses and put on luxurious dress and ornaments and to ride in palanquins. Most of these privileges, however, applied only to the male members of the yangban class; its females members were always kept inside the domestic quarters and systematically discriminated against.

What did the yangban do? Essentially, they were idlers. Only a small percentage of them were incumbent officials; a larger number were former officials, but the great majority were just idlers. We can conjure up a two sided image of the yangban. They were educated people, well versed in the Confucian classics, Chinese poetry, and history. They were the guardians of high culture and the establishment. On the other hand, they were the parasites, the exploiters of the people.

In the second echelon were the chungin, the middle people (class). This group comprised two types of people. The first were highly educated specialists which included interpreters (Chinese or Japanese), medical doctors, astronomers, geomancers, lawyers, musicians, and painters. Although some of them were employed as government officials,they could serve only in their special fields and could not be promoted beyond certain ranks. The yangban class set up a legal and social barrier between themselves and the middle class,most of whom lived in the middle of the city near the Ch’onggye-ch’on stream. They married among themselves and intermarried with the yangbans’ children by concubines.

The second group of the "middle people" included the clerks and the runners of the central and the municipal governments and non-commissioned officers. Unlike the first group, these people neither received any specialized education nor passed any government examinations, so their status was lower than the first group. In origin,they came from destitute yangban families or [page 8] better-off commoner families. In Seoul,there were more than a thousand government clerks and as many runners. Many of them lived in the back alleys near the offices they served,i.e. Ch’ongjin-dong. Their role made them servile to the yangban but overbearing to the commoners and below.

The great majority of Seoulites were the commoners and the “mean people,” who together comprised from 70 to 80 percent of the city’s population. The commoners were engaged in all sorts of work: merchants,artisans, and servants of yangban families. The “mean people” refers to the slaves owned by government agencies or private individuals. They either served their owners doing drudgery or paid annual tribute to their owners. Although they were exempted from military service and corvee work,they were subject to sale and inheritance. Their lot was worse than that of the commoners. In terms of population, the number of commoners and “mean people” was probably equal.

To our great regret, we have little information about the life of the average Seoulite in the fifteenth century. No doubt it was hard and dull. In the wake of the Confucian zealots’ purges of heterodoxy, monks and shamans were banished,and Seoul was deprived of Buddhist festivities and rituals. The kisaeng, the female entertainers,belonged to the lowly class but served the upper class. There were only a handful of foreigners in Seoul,a few naturalized Chinese who were employed as royal advisors and a few Manchu chieftains who held military titles. As for the hundreds of Japanese refugees,the Korean government had them settled in the rural area.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have surveyed the three aspects of Seoul as the new capital of the Choson dynasty: selection, construction, and population. Now let us make an evaluation of the new capital by answering some relevant questions. First of all,was the selection of the site adequate? Evidently the founders of the new dynasty made a very sound decision. Its location and geographical features satisfied the basic requirements of the capital. Seoul enjoyed all the advantages of convenient transportation, communication, and defense. That is why it remained the capital of Korea for the next six centuries.

Secondly, was the construction work a good job? The answer is yes. The construction proved durable, and the main structure of the city: the walls, the streets, the palaces, bridges, did not need any major changes. Only its wooden builaings were occasionally destroyed, for instance, during the Japanese inva- [page 9] sion of 1592-1598, and had to be reconstructed. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, the population of Seoul doubled and then tripled, but the city had no problem in accommodating this expanded population.

Thirdly, was Seoul a nice place to live? The answer depends entirely on what you were. If you were a member of the yangban class, you could enjoy all the niceties of the metropolis in addition to your yangban privileges. If you belonged to the “middle people” there was no place like Seoul which had a high concentration of professionals,specialists in foreign languages, medicine, law, astronomy, geomancy, painting, and music. You could have a decent income and good company. If you had commoner status or that of the “mean people,” Seoul was perhaps worse than elsewhere. You had to be cunning and streetwise.

All in all, Seoul was the heart and soul of medieval Korea. Political power radiated from here to every corner of the Korean peninsula; the wealth of the kingdom converged in Seoul; the most educated and talented people gathered here. This was a place of opportunity. That is why most people were eager to send their sons to Seoul. On the other hand, Seoul lacked splendor and grandeur. It had little extravagance or pomp. Rather it was a beautiful, functional, medieval city.