

THE OTHER FACE OF SEOUL NOT EXACTLY APPETIZING



Growth Also Means Mounting Trouble

Hong Chan-shik

Cho Kyong-taek, 37, married seven years ago. Life has seldom been sweeter than these days for him. Early last year, he at last realized his long-cherished dream of buying an apartment.

Cho, an insurance company employee, had set aside more than half of his monthly salaries and cut what possible pennies from his daily spendings all these years. Yet, he had to borrow part of the money needed to buy his apartment from a bank. Anyway, he felt great about having a home of his own, though small and far from luxurious.

A considerable portion of his joy, however, seems to come from his newly achieved pride as a "full-time" resident of the great metropolis of Seoul. All these years after marriage, he had to spend a few hours each day in crowded buses or subway trains to commute to his office in downtown Seoul. His home was mostly on the outskirts of the city, where home rentals were relatively affordable for him.

Last October, he invited some of his closest friends to his home for a housewarming party. He told his friends over drinks how he felt about permanently moving into Seoul after so many frustrating experiences he had while moving from one inexpensive rented room to another on its humble outskirts.

Cho's story is downright typical among so many Koreans. It has been a common sense of sort among them over the centuries that Seoul offers all the finest chances for success and wealth.

Is Seoul truly a haven to be so much desired as a place to live in? The answer is yes for a majority of Koreans, but not without a skeptical feeling about its many problems.

In most countries, people may have the common wish to be freed from the backbreaking labor in the farming field, or the eternal backwardness of small provincial towns with little hope for development.

Such a wish has been particularly conspicuous among the Koreans. Many of the problems Seoul is faced with nowadays have been derived from the belief that life can be much more decent and successful here than elsewhere. And this has predominated the Korean public since ancient times.

BURGEONING POPULATION

Seoul's population stood at 10,576,000 as of the end of 1989, coming almost par with the world's largest metropolises like Shanghai or Tokyo. Seoul had only 6,880,000 permanent residents in 1975. During the last 15 years, its population grew at an unre-

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cedented rate of 54 percent.

What makes the city administrators even more concerned is that Seoul's population is steadily increasing by some 200,000 to 300,000 persons each year. It represents an annual growth rate of 2.82 percent, which is higher than the national growth rate registered at 1.6 percent.

Whereas the national population growth rate is ever waning, the capital city has been showing an increasingly higher rate in recent years. It marked 1.44 percent in 1985, 1.65 percent in 1986, 1.96 percent in 1987 and 2.95 percent in 1988.

Seoul's population grows in the main because of migration from outside than by births within its city limits. It is not only the capital city proper that is confronted with the problem of burgeoning population. A considerable number of those who wish to move to Seoul from the countryside find themselves settled in smaller cities surrounding it — like Anyang, Suwon, Incheon, Uijongbu and Songnam — owing to insufficient financial resources or various other reasons. Consequently, a dense population belt has formed around the capital city.

A recent government statistics has disclosed that some 15,800,000 people, accounting for more than one third of the nation's total population, reside in the capital area comprising Seoul and its vicinities. The figure comes only next to a few largest cities in the world, including the Tokyo area with a population amounting to 28,700,000, Mexico City with 19,400,000, New York with 17,400,000 and Sao Paulo with 17,200,000.

Over 70 percent of those who reside in the vicinities of Seoul commute to their workplaces in the capital city. The daily flow of these people results in the roads and subways connecting Seoul and its satellite cities and towns being amazingly overcrowded during rush hours.

The population density of Seoul marks 17,470 per square kilometer, the highest among all major cities around the world. It has been long since Seoul was free from most urban problems commonly suffered by the world's big cities. Unfortunately, it has reached the point of seeking almost revolutionary measures to heal its many illnesses.

Probably, the continuous population inflow to Seoul could be best explained with the traditional value system and life goals of Koreans. During the Confucian-dominated Choson period (1392-1910), a majority of Koreans believed that joining the officialdom in Seoul was the greatest success a man could achieve in his lifetime. Many Korean parents believed, and still believe, that by whatever means their children should be educated in Seoul offering all the best chances for success.

An old Korean saying goes like this: "Send new-born horses to Cheju Island but all children to Seoul." Scholars who had the best chances to join officialdom and climb up its ladder occupied the highest social stratum during the Choson period, followed by the farmers, technicians and merchants, in that order.

The population inflow to the capital city was even more accelerated in the modernization process of Korean society, due primarily to the increasing deterioration of farming communities. Agriculture has registered only limited improvement in methods after World War II and Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. Farming villages in Korea have long been faced with ravaging poverty and a growing number of farmers have left their ancestral homes in the hope of finding new jobs in Seoul.

Korea's manufacturing industries have grown fast in a wave of industrialization since the 1960s, requiring a huge manpower and consequently absorbing the flood of new migrants to the capital area from the provinces. A large number of these migrants had no previous training for jobs in the city or anyone to help them get settled in Seoul. They were simply drawn by the vague hope that, once in Seoul, they might not have to worry about earning daily meals any more.

FLOOD OF MIGRANTS

The migration to Seoul still continues. Despite the general economic improvement, Korean farming villages show few signs to recover from their long recession. Of late, they are even more depressed by the increasing import of agricultural products from abroad and the mounting pressure to open food markets from the United States and other major exporters of agricultural products.

The outstanding enthusiasm for education characterizing the Korean people must be another important reason for the explosive population growth in Seoul.

Most Korean parents believe that their children need at least a college degree if they are to make their ways to a respectable social level. Applicants for college enrollment just naturally flock to Seoul where most prestigious schools are located. The majority of students with prominent academic performances in provincial high schools do not apply for colleges in their provinces. They come up to Seoul to enter better schools. Few return home even after finishing college education.

In addition, not a few parents move to Seoul themselves for a better education of their children. It is evident that such an enthusiastic attitude of Korean parents toward their children's education has played a remarkable role for the development of Korean economy, but not without undesirable side effects.

A large number of young people, on the contrary, are attracted to Seoul out of their simple curiosity about the excitement of city life. They touch off other problems.

Table—Population Increase in Seoul

(Unit: 1,000)

Year	Population	Households
1975	6,889	1,409
1980	8,384	1,842
1985	8,839	2,328
1986	8,788	2,428
1987	9,991	2,518
1988	10,286	2,658
1989	10,576	2,816

Source: Seoul city government statistics.

Such a fast increase of population has caused above all else a serious shortage of housing in the metropolitan area. Statistics compiled by the city government show that the housing supply rate remained mostly below 60 percent during the 1980s. In 1989, the rate slightly increased to mark 60.7 percent.

Another set of statistics reveals an interesting phenomenon. Some 210,000 housing units were newly constructed in Seoul from 1980 to 1985. During the same five-year period, however, the number of households in the capital city increased by more than 490,000. This indicates that it is almost impossible for the housing supply to catch up with the runaway rise of households.

Since 1987, in particular, the skyrocketing real estate prices have been ever reducing the chances of Seoulites to own homes. In 1987, an apartment of 35-pyong space (one pyong equals 3.3 square meters) could be bought for about 50 to 60 million won (US\$71,500 to 85,700). But the price has jumped four to five times over the last three years. At least 200 to 250

million *won* was required to buy an apartment of the same space last year.

Most salary earners, therefore, find to their dismay that it is practically impossible to buy a house in Seoul even if they save the whole amount of their earnings through their lifetime. Actually, many give up their hope to own a home.

Why does the real estate price soar up at such a shocking pace in Seoul? Before all else, it must be attributed to the psychology behind real estate speculation prevailing in the Korean society these days. Another important reason is that Seoul is running short of land that can be used for housing construction.

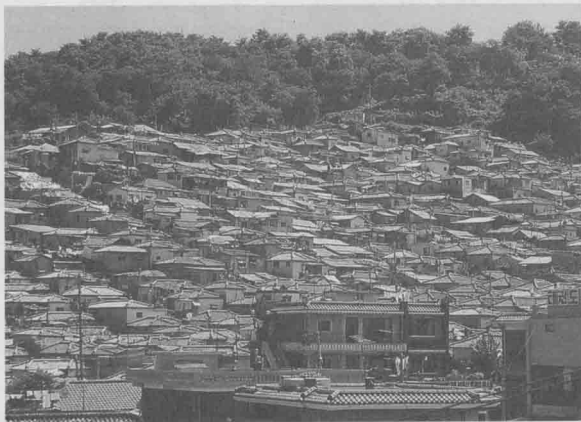
Two popular areas where new housing development projects are under way at present are the Suso District and Kayang District, located respectively on the southern and western outskirts of the city. But not even these districts have land space to accommodate more than 40,000 units, falling far short of satisfying the ever rising demands.

HOUSING SHORTAGE

The soaring real estate prices have brought about the greatest frustration to the homeless citizens in Seoul. In step with the housing prices jumping up at a disheartening pace, the home rental rates went up so sharply in the last couple of years that many tenants were asked to double their rents at once or move out.

In a bid to resolve such a serious housing shortage, President Roh Tae-woo promised during his election campaign in 1987 that he would, if elected, work to build two million housing units for low-income citizens during his five years in office. Some 400,000 of these new units are planned to be constructed in the Seoul area by 1992, but still, they cannot meet the annual household increases amounting to 100,000.

The government announced a plan to develop four new satellite cities some 20 to 25 kilometers away from the central area of Seoul as part of its effort to disperse population. The plan is already being implemented and the sale of new apartments is under way in the new cities called Pundang, Ilsan, Sanbon and Pyongchon.



Taldongnae (moon village) of this kind still dots Seoul today. These villages are being replaced rapidly in urban renewal projects.

Nevertheless, not so many people seem to believe that these new apartments will help ease the housing shortage suffered by the citizens of Seoul to any remarkable extent, much less contributing to the population dispersion. Most of those who purchased the new apartments turned out to be Seoulites, but they will still have to commute to their work sites in Seoul daily even after moving to their new homes.

Some experts even pointed out that the government is encouraging a still greater population concentration in the capital area by constructing new satellite cities because they will attract more migrants from the provinces.

Another crucial factor for the sharp housing shortage in Seoul is the growing tendency among its citizens to favor the nuclear family. Due to the influence of industrialization and modernization — the Western mode of life — the traditional extended families are ever disappearing and young couples these days tend to form independent households upon marriage, contributing to the mounting demand for houses.

At the same time, a great number of people have come to regard houses and apartments as the most efficient speculative means to multiply their property in a short time span. These people are making the situation more desperate for the mushrooming army of house hunters in Seoul.

REAL ESTATE SPECULATION

The housing policy of the metropolitan government places emphasis on building more small units and rental homes for low-income citizens. Heavy taxes are levied on unearned incomes occurring from speculative dealings of real estates in order to protect the majority of citizens from the endlessly zooming real estate prices.

Among the most serious problems encountered by the city of Seoul, along with the housing shortage, is the traffic congestion. The traffic congestion begins very early in the morning, when commuters leave their homes to make unending lines of cars on the roads leading to the downtown business areas from the city's outskirts in all directions.

The traffic jam in Seoul begins around 7 a.m. on the outer perimeter of the city and reaches its peak around 8:30 a.m. Sometimes, it takes more than an hour to drive a short distance of 10 to 15 kilometers. Particularly, the bridges across the Han River and tunnels through Namsan, linking the residential areas in Kangnam and the downtown business districts north of the river, are usually filled with long lines of cars that almost appear to stand still.

At present, buses take care of the largest portion of human movement in Seoul. Buses account for 50.6 percent of it, followed by subways (16.8 percent), privately operated cars (16.6 percent) and taxis (16 percent). More people seem to be using subways instead of buses or taxis in recent years to avoid the terrible traffic congestion on the roads.

Seoul currently has four subway lines. No. 1 Line runs through the central area from Chongnyangni Station in the east to Seoul Railway Station in the west; No. 2 Line goes around the downtown areas and the outer perimeter of the city; No. 3 Line connects Kupabal on the northwestern outskirts and Yangjae-dong on the southern border; and No. 4 Line links Sadang-dong on the southwestern outskirts and Sanggye-dong on the northeastern outskirts.

During rush hours, the subway trains are always loaded with passengers far exceeding their capacity. The commuting condition on Seoul's subways is far from pleasant or comfortable. The No. 1 Line stretching out to the nearby cities of Incheon and Suwon, is still more terribly jam-packed because it is the fastest means to bring commuters from these cities to Seoul.

The commuters have to wage a "battle" every morning to get into cars on this line. At almost

all stations, stalwart "pushers" are seen pushing passengers on the back to cram them into the already overcrowded cars. Once inside the car, the passengers will find it hard even to breathe.

It is said that more than two-thirds of commuter traffic depend on subways in other large metropolises like New York, Tokyo, London and Paris. Experts here share the opinion that the only possible way to ease Seoul's traffic congestion at the moment is building more subways to extend their network.

The metropolitan government of Seoul plans to construct four new subway lines, which will lift the total length of subways operating in the capital areas from the present 168 kilometers to 300 kilometers by 1997. The existing lines will either be extended or connected with new lines to increase their transportation capacities as much as possible.

Seoul has a long way to go to reach the level of other major cities of the world in the total length of its subway network. Tokyo has the longest network totaling 544 kilometers, followed by Paris with 473 kilometers, New York with 385 kilometers, and London with 383 kilometers.

TRAFFIC CONGESTION

What is even more depressing is that there is little hope for the traffic condition in Seoul to notably improve in the near future. The city government's subway construction plan will require at least five to seven years to be completed.

The greatest problem with the traffic on the ground is caused by a shocking rise in the number of cars. Seoul had only 350,000 cars in 1983, which more than doubled to reach 780,000 by 1988, and then topped the one million mark in 1990.

Over these years the driving speed in Seoul has been continuously dropping, with the number of cars growing quickly in contrast to the space of roads remaining almost the same. The average driving speed was registered as 25.5 kilometers per hour in 1983. It gradually slowed down to 22.1 kilometers in 1988, 21 kilometers in 1989 and then 20 kilometers in 1990.

Some scholars point out jokingly that, with the number of cars swelling at the present pace, it will be faster to walk than to drive in the not so distant future in Seoul. The city government predicts that the average driving speed will further go down to 12 kilometers per hour by 2000.



Flood of cars, trucks and buses in Seoul.

Owning a car for private use has been a kind of fashion among the citizens of Seoul since the mid-1980s. Not only those of the so-called middle class but also of the low-income bracket have been affected by this sweeping trend to become a member of what is called the "my car group" even though it accompanies a considerable financial burden.

Of course, some of these people could have been encouraged to buy a car by the prevailing social trend to pursue greater comfort and pleasure in daily life. On the contrary, however, many of them were obviously motivated by the very practical need to go to work without exhausting themselves in the overcrowded buses or subway trains. The heavy traffic congestion in Seoul is causing a vicious circle by encouraging the citizens to buy more cars.

Buses cannot fulfill their role as a public transportation means in Seoul, where the number of automobiles increases at the rate of 10 to 20 percent every year. Buses on certain lines passing through the crowded downtown areas are operated with longer intervals of 20 or 30 minutes.

Every evening on weekdays, traffic in downtown appears to be almost paralyzed with cars crawling bumper to bumper in unending lines. Experts in urban planning insist that the new life pattern of citizens has contributed to the traffic jam in Seoul which grows ever more serious. A large number of citizens have to cross the Han River to go to work every morning and then cross back the river again in the evening to return home.

Along with its notorious traffic congestion, Seoul is suffering from a disastrous lack of parking space. It is true that almost all large cities in other countries face similar problems, but Seoul is trapped in an even more difficult situation. The city is deemed incapable of resolving its shortage in parking space for it lacks basic facilities prepared in the early stage of urban planning.

LACK OF PARKING SPACE

In most cases, drivers are compelled to park their cars by the roadside or in the back alleys, adding further up to the already helpless traffic jam. Traffic administrators have tightened control over illegal parking and introduced the exclusive bus lanes along busy roads in order to help ease the traffic flow.

Traffic congestion almost completely disappeared from Seoul during the 1988 Summer Olympic Games period, when the government introduced a system to operate the privately-owned cars every other day, those with odd plate numbers to operate only on the days of odd numbers and those with even plate numbers only on the days of even numbers. Similar ideas could be studied to introduce more enduring measures to help the traffic stream in the city.

There is no doubt that Seoul serves as the showcase of Korea. Problems faced by Seoul may therefore be considered as the problems suffered by the entire Korean nation. The efforts to improve life in Seoul, at the same time, will result in the overall enhancement of the quality of life of all Koreans. ☺

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