[page 45]

**Seoul**

**Sam Kidder**

Seoul,which celebrates its 600th birthday this year,is one of the world’s great cities. For 500 years it was the intellectual and political center of a remarkably refined and stable kingdom. During this century,Seoul’s isolation was rudely broken and it became the nexus of struggles among regional and global powers. Seoul’s history is as rich as it is long,but unfortunately it is not well known beyond Korea. One way to see the wealth of imagination and human activity in this ancient city is through the window of place names. This essay is my attempt to provide one brief glimpse through that window.

Hanyang (한양,漢陽),the formal name for the Choson Dynasty capital, first appears during the Silla Dynasty. Koreans have lived in what now is Seoul since neolithic times; one site, at Amsa-dong (암사동,岩寺洞),has been restored ana is open to the public. Within Olympic Park are the mud fortifica- tions of Wirye-song (위례성,慰禮城) site of the Paekche capital before that kingdom’s rulers were forced south to Kongju, then Buyo by expansionist Koguryo. Two other fortifications, one at P’ungnap-dong (풍납동,風納洞) at the southeastern end of Ch’onho Bridge, and another on Ach’a-san, known to many foreigners as Walker Hill, date from this period. By the reign of Silla King Kyongdok (r. 742-65) the administrative district that encompasses much of modern Seoul was known as Hanyang. In early Unified Silla the area was called Hansan-ju (한산주,韓山州); later in the same dynasty it was renamed Hanyang-gun (한양부,漢陽郡). In early Koryo the district was called Yangju (양주,陽州),the name still applied to the county just east of the city. By the final century of Koryo the Seoul area had become known as Hanyang-bu (한양부,漢陽府). All these changes were bureaucratic and did not affect the essential meaning of the name.

The Han (한, 漢) of Hanyang, is the Chinese character that is used for the Han River but is not the same Han (한, 漢) used for Han’guk or Korea. It is [page 46] likely derived from references to the Han River of China found in the Book of Poetry (시경,詩經) and the Book of History (서경,經書) two important mainstays of the Confucian canon and rich sources of classical allusions for the literate Korean aristocracy. One ode in the Book of Poetry describes the Han River in China as one whose width cannot be swum (漢之擴矣 不可泳四). The Book of History describes the same river’s eastward course,which is not unlike the westward course of Korea’s Han River. The yang (양, 陽) is the masculine,aggressive or bright aspect of the Taoist yin-yang dualism,umyang (음양,陰陽) in Korean. The northern bank of the river, the side which receives the most sunlight, is associated with the yang aspect. Hanyang, then,simply means the north or sunny side of the Han River.

The residents of the Choson Dynasty’s capital knew that they lived in Hanyang, but like modern citizens they tended to refer to their city as Seoul. Seoul is a pure Korean word and is not written with Chinese characters. The origins of the name are obscure and in dispute. The most convincing explanation is that Seoul is derived through generations of phonetic changes from the Silla term for its capital, Sobol or Sorabol. A less compelling explanation is that Seoul is a popular contraction of song (성,城) which means wall or fortress and ult’ari (울타리),a Korean word meaning enclosure. A third perhaps equally unconvincing theory is that Seoul comes from joining the term sol (설,雪),snow,and the same ult’ ari. According to folk legend,the city wall was built along a line across the mountains which was left by the snow during the days the city’s founders were surveying for the new capital. This explanation at least has charm and the further attraction that later generations often referred to the city wall as the snow wall. In any case, with liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945,and as an assertion of Korean cultural liberation from Chinese forms, Seoul became the official name for the city.

Seoul’s founders lived in a land and an age in which Koreans believed that the supernatural forces that determined the fate of men and kingdoms were embedded in the configuration of the natural landscape. The study of these forces, called geomancy, was a major preoccupation of the founders of the dynasty. Finding a sue for the new capital which had the geomantic attributes to assure the security and continuity of the new ruling house was a consuming political issue. Donald Clark and James Grayson’s Discovering Seoul, published by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1986,has an excellent account of the geomantic controversies involved in establishing the capital in its current location. (See pp. 307-312.)

The geomantic virtues of Seoul were already apparent by the last two centuries of Koryo rule. In the opening years of the 12th century, an official [page 47] hostlery, Kyongmu-dae (경무대, 警務臺) was established near the base of Pukhan-san. Toward the end of the dynasty,there was sufficient official atten-tion, including establishment of a detached palace, for Koryo’s rulers to consider the area its southern capital. Geomantic theory calls for concentration of energy,ki (기, 氣) at a point near the southern base of a primary mountain,in the case of Seoul, Pugak-san. The site should be bounded on the east by mountains resembling a blue dragon and on the west by a ridge shaped like a white tiger. An outer ring of protective mountains—Samgak-san is considered Seoul’s guardian mountain—and a major watercourse in the foreground are additional attributes necessary for geomantic harmony. Seoul had all these elements. More practical modern historians may explain that Seoul was a convenient nexus of inland and coastal transportation and that the surrounding mountains facilitated defense. The city walls were far enough inland to discourage the pirates who were a scourge of coastal regions in late Koryo times,and the self-contained drainage basin within the walls ensured a reliable source of fresh water in case of siege. The dynasty’s founders understood these considerations but chose to express themselves in geomantic terms.

The legacy of Seoul’s geomantic heritage is most pronounced in the names of natural features, particularly mountains. The blue dragon, which runs from Pugak-san, behind the Blue House, through Ungbong (응봉,鷹峯,Falcon Peak) north of Ch’angdok Palace then on through Naksan (낙산,駱山,Camel Mountain) the ridge east of Taehangno,gives some idea of the mythical menagerie that lurks beneath the pavements and apartments of Seoul. The white tiger’s spirit flows from Pugak-san to Inwang-san (인왕산,仁旺山),which is a pretentious Confucian name meaning ‘Benevolent Prosperity Mountain.’ Crossing Muakchae the names become more colorful- Muachae is a slightly off center transcription of Moak (모악,母岳),or Mother Peak, with the pure Korean suffix chae (재),which means ‘hill’ , and recalls a mother who had lost her child. From Muakchae, the tiger force flows through Ansan (안산,鞍山),or Saddle Mountain, named for its shape, then along Ahyon Hill and along the ridge that separates Map’o and Yongsan wards. The last hill before the white tiger, which spends its geomantic force as it reaches the river, was thought to resemble a dragon crouching to drink. This hill is called Yongsan (용산,龍山),Dragon Hill

Seoul’s subterranean geomantic zoo is not confined within the city’s walls. Samgak-san (삼간산,三角山), or Three Horned Mountain, is another name for Pukhan-san, which has three major peaks. These peaks were regarded as the horns of the capital’s guardian dragon. There was good grazing outside the walls for geomantic cattle. The hill behind Hongik University is [page 48] Wau-san (와우산, 臥牛山), Reclining Cow Mountain; south of Seoul Arts Center another somnolent bovine has become Umyon-san (우면산,牛眠山),’Sleep- ing Cow Mountain’; and on the road towards Uijo’gbu, yet another cow’s ears are sticking into the sky at Ui-dong (우이농,牛耳洞), Cow’s Far Precinct. Not all of the animals are dozing cattle. The hill just south of Wangsim-ni is Dancing Crane Mountain (무학산,無學山), a poetic image that promises more than the modest local park that occupies the summit today.day.

Many of the place names in Seoul are simple descriptions. Most of these are obvious to Koreans and to foreigners with only a rudimentary knowledge of Chinese characterss. Occasionally there is at least a short history lesson behind the name. Songbuk-gu (성북구,城北區) and Songdong-gu (성동구,城東區) simply mean the wards north and east of the city wall,respectively. Nam- san (남산,南山) is South Mountain; Kangnam (강남,江南) means south of the river,and so forth. Of slightly more interest is Chong-no (종로,鍾路),which means Bell Street. The bell that was rung to signal the closing and opening of the city gates hung in the pavilion along this major east-west thoroughfare, and a modern descendant of that bell is now at the site and is used to ring in the new year. Sinch’on (신촌,新村) means New Village, and as a formal name is a legacy of the city’s expansion during the Japanese colonial era.

Other names keep alive some of the military history of Seoul. Majang-dong (마장동, 馬場洞) recalls the pastures for the dynasty’s horses which roamed the broad fields beyond East Gate. A number of military facilities including training grounds, the site for testing for the military exam and the shrine to the God of War were all located near or just beyond East Gate. The Japanese and now the American Far East District Corps of Engineers have had bases here and the old training grounds are the venue today for displays of twentieth century physical prowess, Tongdaemum Stadium. Just as there were gates to the city, the neighborhoods both within and outside the wall often had their own gates Similar to modern Seoul’s police boxes, these gates were called Imun (이문,里門) and there were as many as a hundred scattered throughout the city. Ssangmun-dong (쌍문동,雙門洞) Double Gate Precinct,derived from the double gates leading into that neighborhood, is one example. South of the wall there was another area occupied by the military. The hill where the Ministry of National Defense is located is called Tunsan (둔산,屯 山) which can be translated as Encampment Hill and has been associated with military activities throughout Seoul’s history. With the Japanese military buildup during colonial times, one precinct near the base became known as Namyong-dong (남영동, 南營洞),a name which is now official and could aptly be translated as South Post. [page 49]

Place names also teach us about the daily life of the ancient capital Map,o (마포,麻浦),literally Hemp Port,was a major docking area for boats bringing coastal products up the Han estuary to Seoul. Kup’abal (구파발,舊把撥),or Old Post Station,is the first relay station north of the city on the road to Munsan. Both It’ aewon(이태원, 梨泰院) and Hongje-dong (홍제동, 弘濟洞),are names of hosteleries where travelers approaching the city from the south or north could spend the night before proceeding into the city. Yomni-dong (염리동,墜里洞),or Salt Village Precinct,takes its name from the salt merchants who lived there. It several locations in the countryside surrounding Hanyang, women raised silkworms to clothe the royal household. Both Chamwonn- dong(잠원동, 麗院洞),Silkworm Garden Precinct, at the south end of the Hannam Bridge, and Chamsil (잠실,蠶室), Silkworm Raising Room, were sites for sericulture and derive their names from this important economic activity. Another concern was food preservation and there were several ice houses, two down by the river. The Western Ice House, Sobinggo (서빙고,西氷庫),was for royal use. The Eastern Ice House was further up river near the present Oksu-dong and was not used exclusively by the court. The royal ice house was a more important and imposing structure and the current place names, Dongbinggo-dong (동빙고동,東水庫洞) and Sobinggo-dong (서빙고동,西水庫洞),East and West Ice House Precinct, respectively, refer to the areas to the east and west of that main royal ice house.

There are several reasons why simple knowledge of the Chinese characters used is not always enough to ascertain the derivation of a place name. One reason is that the literal reading of the characters may not tell the whole story. One example would be Ch’ onho-dong in eastern Seoul Ch’onho (천호,千戶) means one thousand households, and might be thought to be a description of the area or its population. In fact, Ch’onho is the courtesy name of the father of Yi Songgye,the dynasty’s founder,and the name was given in his memory. A second example is Samch’ong-dong (삼청동,三淸洞) which means Precinct of the Three Purities, all very nice but meaningless until we find that the purities were the purity of man,water,and mountain,an indication of the area’s role as a source of fresh water and as an escape from the dirty city streets.

A second reason not to put full faith in the meaning of the Chinese characters is that they are often renderings of Korean words and may have changed over time. P’il-dong (필동, 筆洞) means Writing Brush Precinct and would seem to indicate that this may have been an area where calligraphy brushes were either made or sold, but the area was known by Hanyang residents as Pugol (부골 or 붓골). The pu (부,府) is the term for the five major [page 50] administrative districts of the Choson Dynasty capital,and gol means valley,but, put (붓) also means writing brush in pure Korean. The Chinese character p,il (筆) for writing brush, became the formal name for the neighborhood. A better known case perhaps is Wangsim-ni (왕십리,往十里) which means proceed for a distance of ten li (about 3 miles). There are various versions of a story about a monk, Muhak,who was one of the influential geomancers involved in siting the city. When at this location, Muhak either met an old man or found a tablet that told him to proceed ten li to discover the geomantic center for the new capital. These stories do not appear in the contemporary dynastic records and are apparently later accretions to the folk history of Seoul’s founding. Early maps use a different character for wang (왕,旺) which means prosperity and various characters pronounced sim (심), not sip (십) for the second character of the name. The modern place name makes for a good story but not good history.

Administrative reorganization during the Japanese colonial period also obscured the original meanings of a number of place names in Seoul. For almost 520 years the city was dividea into five pu (부,府),which in turn were subdivided into pang (방,坊) of which there were 50-52. These in turn were subdivided into kye (계,契) and further into tong (동,洞). There were more than 300 kye and almost 800 tong. In 1914 the Japanese carried out a sweeping reorganization and more than half of the tong names were thrown out. In many cases,one tong was combined with its neighbor. In comoining neighborhoods the Japanese took some modest care in trying to come up with names that made some sense. Unfortunately,the effect on the modern citizen is to obscure the original names even further. For example,Kungjong-dong (궁정동,宮井洞) can be translated as Palace Well Precinct,a seemingly descriptive name for a neighborhood,but it is,in fact,a contraction of Yuk- sang-gung (육상궁,統祥宮) or Yuksang Palace, and Onjong-dong(온정동, 溫井洞) Hot Well Precinct. This hot well was not one of the palaces’ sources of water. Insa-dong (인사동,仁寺洞) is another Japanese combination putting together the in (인,仁) of Kwanin-bang (관인방,寬仁坊) with Sa-dong (사동, 寺洞)• Sa-dong means Temple Precinct and refers to Wongak-sa,the major early Choson Dynasty temple in Chongno 3-ga,whose stele and pagoda still grace the park there.

With liberation from Japanese rule in 1945 and following the destruction of the Korean War,Seoul began a new period of vigorous expansion. In a burst of pent up nationalism Korea looked to patriotic heroes or towering cultural figures to name the new thoroughfares that were being bulldozed through the rubble and hovels of the old city. Ulchi-ro was named after [page 51] Koguryo General Ulchi Mundok,who led the successful resistance against a Chinese invasion early in the seventh century and T’oeggye-ro is named for a famous Choson Dynasty philosopher. Wonhyo-ro takes its name from the most notable monk of Silla times and Ch’ungjong-ro (충정로, 忠正路) is from the courtesy name of Min Yonghwan, who was an advisor to King Kojong and took his own life when the Protectorate Treaty was signed with Japan in 1905. Following this pattern, and depending, of course,on the verdict of his-tory, one day there may be a Park Place or a Rho-ro.

The preceding is only a brief peek at the richness of Seoul’ s history that can be glimpsed through the window of place names. There are literally thousands of examples, of which I have cited only a few. With the 600th anniversary of the founding of the city,a rich literature,both academic and popular, has appeared in Korean,some of which I list below. The world is now well aware of the remarkable economic accomplishments of recent generations of Seoulites. I hope that in this anniversary year the world will begin to appreciate more the equally remarkable achievements of the ancestors of Seoul’s citizens. Happy Dirthday, Hanyang!

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The following is a list of several ward and precinct names and their origins taken primarily from materials provided by the historical and cultural offices of the wards.

Chongno-gu (종로구,鍾路區),Bell Street Ward,from the bell used to signal the opening and closing of the city gates.

Kye-dong (계동,桂洞),Cinnamon Street. The name was originally Chesaeng- dong (제생동,濟生洞),Life Saving Precinct from the herb hospital there called Chesaeng-won. It gradually came to be called Kyesaeng-dong but the “saeng" character was dropped since it sounded too much like Kisaeng-dong.

Naeja-dong (내자동, 內資洞), This name is from Naejasa (내자사,內資司) a government agency located in this district. This agency was responsible ror providing rice,noodles,wine,soy sauce,vegetables,and other items to the palace.

Myongnyun-dong (명륜동,明倫洞). The name was used only from the Japanese colonial period when a number of smaller neighborhoods were combined. The name is taken from the name of a Confucian lecture hall,Myongnyun-dang (명 륜당,明倫棠) that was located within Songgyun-gwan,the leading Confucian academy of the dynastic period.

Chung-gu (중구,中區),Central Ward. Self-explanatory.

Myongdong (명동,明洞) Bright Precinct. This name was first used when city districts were by the reorganized Japanese in 1914. The name is a contraction of the Choson period name for one of the neighborhoods in the area, Myongnye-bang (명 례 방,明禮坊) or Bright Propriety District.

Namch’ang-dong and Pukch’ang-dong (남창동, 南倉洞, 북창동,北倉洞) South Warehouse Precinct and North Warehouse precinct. These names reflect the commercial nature of this area of the city just inside South Gate. Ch’ang-dong (창동,倉洞) means Warehouse Precinct and was the name of one of the small Choson era neighborhoods. In the Japanese period,several other neighborhoods were absorbed and the larger area divided into North and South Warehouse Precincts .

Malli-dong (만리동, 萬里洞),Ten Thousand Li Precinct. A literal translation of this hillside neighborhood that straddled one of the main routes out of the city would seem apt to travelers leaving Hanyang on long journeys to the south, but the Chinese characters should not be read literally. Instead the name comes [page 53] from Ch,oi Malli (최만리,崔萬里) an important scholar of Sejong’s famous court whose home was there. In subsequent years, Malli-dong became the site of the traditional New Year’s stone fight between two neighborhoods in the area, the outcome of which was said to predict a bountiful harvest in the province associated with the winning side.

Yongsan-gu (용산구,山龍區). For an account of the geomantic origins of this name please refer to the text.

Pogwang-dong (보광동,普光洞). This area south of It’aewon was incorporated into the city in 1936 and takes its name from a temple built there which in turn took its name from the Silla monk,Ven. Pogwang,who founded the temple. The temple was built to celebrate Silla’s capture from Koguryo of territory up to the. Imjin River. Pogwang-sa continued in operation until the late Choson period as a venue for prayers for rain and for the security of the dynasty.

Hannam-dong (한남동, 漢南洞). This name which appears to be a simple geographic description shows that when dealing with Chinese character names, simplicity can be deceptive. Han is the han of Han River and nam means south. There would seem then to be two choices, either the southern part of the Han River or south of the Han River. In fact,it is best to read the character as the area along the Han River that is to the south of the city or south of Namsan.

Songdong-gu (성동구,城東區),West of the Wall Ward. This is a literal descriptive name

Sagun-dong (사근동,沙斤洞). Sa means sand and gun is a measurement of volume which would seem to indicate that the name would have something to do with the river bank sand, since this precinct is located along the broad flood plain where Ch’ onggye-ch’on flows into Chungnang-ch’on, but the name is a phonetic transcription of an original Korean word sagun (삭은) that is an adjec-tive meaning ruined and refers to a dilapidated Shilla temple that was located there.

Songjong (송정동,松亭洞),Pine Pavilion Precinct. This name comes from a pavilion located there.

Tongdaemun-gu (동대문구,東大門區),East Gate Ward. Again this is a descriptive name.

Sinsol-dong (신설동,新設洞). This name literally means Newly Built Precinct and might seem to be derived from Seoul’s 20th century sprawl, but the name comes from a village that was newly built in Choson times.

Jungnang-gu (중량구,中浪區). This ward’s name comes from the stream [page 54] that flows through it.

Muk-dong (묵동,默洞). This name is a legacy of the capital’s commercial past. Muk means ink,in pure Korean also mok (먹). The name comes from the fact that ink was produced in this area.

Kuro-gu (구로구,九老區,Nine Old Men Ward). This name was originally the name of a village which was notable for the long lives of nine of its residents.

Toksan-dong (독산동,禿山洞,Bare Mountain Precinct.) This name is descriptive and not particularly flattering but recalls the deforestation of much of the land around the capital as noted by early Western travelers to Korea.

Yongdungp’o-gu (영등포구,永登浦區). One literal translation would be the Ward of the Ever Ascending Port, a name that sounds rather ponderous except perhaps for a late Victorian travel book. This name goes back well into the Choson period.

Youi-dong (汝矣島洞) This name means something like “you take it” or “its yours.” Until the Park Chong-hui years Youi Island was little more than a sandy spot along the Han River flood plain and the name derives from the general worthlessness of the land for any agricultural purpose.

Socho-gu (서초구,瑞草區,Auspicious Grass Ward). According to Kim Ki-bin in Hanguk Chimyong ui Sinbi (한국지명의 신비),the name can be paired with Majang-dong which was discussed earlier. Socho was a good spot for pasturage and the ward’s name comes from a village called Sorip’ul, a pure Korean name with a variety of possible meanings but all referring to grass or weeds.

Pangbae-dong (방배동,方背洞,To-the-Rear Precinct). This name came from a village which was backed up against Umyon-san.

Panp’o-dong (반포동, 盤浦洞,Tray or Plate Port Precinct). The p’o suffix indi-cates this was a port village along the river. Although the Chinese character now used to write pan (반) means tray or plate, it was originally written as 蟠 wnich is also pronounced pan. The meaning of this pan is ‘coiled’and it is a Chinese transcription of the pure Korean solitkae, coiled inlet. Again,a simple translation of the Chinese character name proves misleading.

Kwanak-gu (관악구,冠岳區,Crown Peak Ward). This ward’s name comes from Kwanak Mountain which has an important position in Seoul’s geoman- cy. The name derives from the pointed peaks which resemble a royal crown. The name peaks also led geomancers to associate Kwanak Mountain with the [page 55] fire element. The haet’ ae outside Kwanghwamun and the large pond where Seoul Station now stands were both attempts to protect Seoul from the fire element embodied in Kwanak-san.

Kangnam-ku (강남구,江南區,South of the River Ward). This is a simple descriptive name.

Apkujong (압구정동, 狎鷗亭洞,Being Intimate with the Seagulls Pavilion Precinct). The original Sino-Korean is far more poetic than this bulky English translation. This pavilion was built by Han Myong-hoi (1415-1487),one of the leading political figures of his age and noted party host. The lavish entertainments at this scenic but out of the way spot have bequeathed a history of sumptiousness to this neighborhood. The courtesy name (호,號,ho) of Han Myong-hoi is Apkujong with the first character ap (압,鴨) meaning ‘duck’.. In this case, perhaps the name was originally intended to be Duck and Gull Pavilion, a translation which resonates considerably better in English,but the Seoul City Government uses the ap (押)압,押 which means to be intimate with.

Songpuk-gu (성북구,城北區,The Ward North of the Wall). This ward’s name is a description of its location just outside the old city wall.

Chongnung-dong (정능동, 貞陵洞,Chaste Tomb Precinct). Choson Dynasty founder T’aejo first buried his beloved queen in what is now Chongdong (정동,貞洞,Chaste Precinct),the area behind Doksu Palace. This queen’s sons did not manage to take over the royal mantle and after a brief succession struggle their half brother, T’aejong,emerged as ruler. The prohibition against burial within the city wall and T’aejong’,s eagerness to wipe out any evidence of his earlier rivals from the city center led him to move this grave beyond the wall to its present location.

Samson-dong (삼선동,三仙洞,Three Sprite Precinct). This poetic name comes from the three spirits who cavorted there with the Jade Woman, the name given to one of the rocky protuberances to the east of what is now Taehak-no. This part of town is still known as a site for cavorting.

Unp’yong-gu (은평구,恩平區). I decline even a clumsy translation of this ward’s name. In 1911 the Japanese colonial government established eight townships myon (면,面) surrounding Seoul. One of these was called Unp’,yong, taking Chinese character elements from two existing Choson era dis- tricts, Yonun-bang(연은방, 延恩坊)and Sangp’ yong-bang(상평방,常平坊).

Pulgwang-dong (불광동, 佛光洞,The Light of the Buddha Precinct). This name is a direct borrowing from Pulgwang-sa, a temple in the area.

Map,o-gu (마포구,麻浦區,Hemp Port Ward). This name is descriptive of [page 56]

the important of river borne commerce to the economic life of the city. Many Seoulites still speak of the salted shrimp markets along the river in what was a boisterous and brawling village far from the refined yangban living within the city walls.

T’ojong-dong (토정동, 土亭洞,Mud Pavilion Precinct). Mud Pavilion was both the dwelling and the courtesy or pen name of one of the Chosun period’s most eccentric intellectuals, Yi Chiham (이지함,李之函). After a brief but brilliant official career,he began a simple life studying medicine,fortune telling,div-ination and other pursuits that separated him from the mainstream of rigid upper class Confucian society. His book,Tojong pigyol, is still the most popular text Koreans use to predict the future and boasts an accuracy which certainly exceeds that of many modern econometric models.