

Seoul as a global city



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Seoul, the capital of South Korea is a key metropolis in the Far East. The Korean peninsula is quite small, comparable to the United Kingdom or New York State in terms of geographical spread. Its geographic location had subjected Seoul to both American and Far Eastern influences. But when it comes to economic prosperity and social equity, Seoul remains a city of contradictions and paradoxes. The rest of this essay will foray into these economic, social and demographic aspects of Seoul and infer its future role in the global stage.

The long and colorful history of Seoul, in the broader context of the Korean peninsula gives some indication of the present expectations of it. For instance, the occasion of the Olympics that is slated for later this year presents an opportunity for the inhabitants to “ show the world that their fiercely independent culture was never fully overwhelmed by either of its powerful neighbors” (Townsend, 2002). The speakers of one of the most advanced languages ever conceived, the Korean in general and residents of Seoul in particular are keen to regain the glorious past. For instance, “ Guidebooks sometimes refer to the Korean people as the “ Irish of the Orient,” partly because of their capacity for feuding with one another but mainly because of their feistiness and history of affliction. Again and again a visitor is told that the Korean alphabet is the greatest in the world, the Korean military the best educated and the Korean cuisine the spiciest” (Townsend, 2002).

The city of Seoul, by East Asian standards, is one of the most modern and its inhabitants the most outgoing, volatile, boisterous and backslapping group of people. Seoul inhabitants are the “ most ethnically and historically

homogeneous peoples in the world". The stoic spirit of the place and its citizens may be partly due to a history " of war, invasion, occupation, resistance, war, destruction, rebirth, peace-and war" (Louise, 2008). The legacy of such a tumultuous past is still being felt today. Take say, the region of Greater Seoul. It is home to close to 10 million people that include some of the richest industrialists. This part of the city is also the " political, cultural, educational, and business hub" (Louise, 2008). Seoul is also the favorite destination for some of the biggest transnational corporations to set up their production facilities. The place also attracts allied service providers like public relations industry and other business corporations. Seoul is second to no other city in terms of the research and development activity that is carried out there. The following passage substantiates Seoul claim to be regarded a true global city:

" Manufacturing complexes surround the city. Seoul and its suburbs boast 9, 000 factories, employing more than 360, 000 workers. They've suffered in the last two years, but most Seoul businesses have recovered from the late-'90s Asian flu. It is home to small manufacturers such as Won's and it also hosts complexes run by large corporations. They are drawn by the suburb's proximity to Qingdao, Dalian, and other major cities in China, which vies with the U. S. as Korea's top market for exports" (Smith and Timberlake, 2002).

While the aforementioned qualities would place Seoul in the Global city bracket, a few other realities associated with the place might question this assertion. Setting apart the ever present political volatility in South Korea, the distribution of wealth in Seoul remains highly inequitable (Chang-Hee

and Myung-Jin, 2003). While South Korea has had a tremendous economic growth period over the last twenty years or so, the percentage of the population of Seoul that lives close to subsistence levels is quite an anomaly. It is true that the annual per capita gross national product was close to 100 dollars five decades ago. Today, it hovers close to three thousand dollars - an impressive thirty-time increase (Louise, 2008). Yet, the statistics on class divisions and the proportions of different socio-economic classes within Seoul has remained quite static. This negative aspect of the city will weigh against it, in its aim to be considered a truly global city (Hill, 2000).

The social inequities evident in the suburbs of Seoul are another significant factor going against its stature as a global city. For example,

“ South of Incheon lies the suburb of Chun-An, some 40 miles from downtown Seoul. Chun-An has lured financing and facilities from Korea’s financial giant to the East. Japanese manufacturers, especially electronics producers, have settled in the Chun-An Industrial Estate. Korea Industrial Complex Corp. (Kicox), which runs the 25 largest industrial parks across the nation, requires manufacturers who want space in that Industrial Estate to maintain at least a 30% foreign stake” (Shin and Timberlake, 2004).

Despite the impressive array of industries set up in the suburbs of Seoul, the lifestyle and incomes of residents there have remained stagnant over the last two decades. For example, just twenty miles south of the city is the information technology region of Suwon, which boasts of hosting leading foreign technology manufacturers in the world. But, this evidence of technological advancement loses its shine when seen in light of the highly

populated residential complexes surrounding Suwon, where the socio-economic conditions are very ordinary (Shin and Timberlake, 2004). While the economic aspects of Seoul, marked by the increase in size of its manufacturing and design industries is a sure sign of the city's advancement into the global stage, certain anomalies associated with this condition undermines this status. For example, the whole of Korea hosts a fifteen billion dollar manufacturing and design industry, with Seoul being the epicenter of all this activity (Shin and Timberlake, 2004). With more growth slated for the immediate future, Seoul's claim to be a global city seems quite legitimate. But competition from other prominent cities in East and South-East Asia is proving to be a formidable challenge to overcome. For instance, "Seoul isn't alone in seeking to boost its global standing through design. Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tokyo, and Yokohama all hold ambitions to be design centers. Then there's global competition from cities like London, Paris, Milan and New York, with many decades as leading arbiters of design. Yet design industry leaders insist there's big potential in Korea. For one, Seoul beat some 20 rivals, including Singapore and Dubai, to be named ICSID's first World Design Capital to be chosen through competition." (BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, 2008)

The volatile and unpredictable relations between and within the North and South Korea has disrupted the growth pattern of both economies. This is no insignificant factor to consider in the process of classifying Seoul as a truly world class city. After all, Seoul is not just the economic capital of South Korea, but also its political capital. And the implications of political instability to the economic scenario are only too well known, as the stark empirical

documentation of their relation shows. The diplomatic efforts on part of both neighbors are bound to have a crucial impact on the future prosperity and stability of Seoul. In this context, the recent negotiations between the respective premiers to resolve some longstanding issues are a good sign. But to remind the international community of the delicate nature of North-South relations, the meeting was disrupted by protests from some prominent labor unions (BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, 2008). Ironically, the demands of the labor are as old as the nations themselves and any agenda of negotiation that does not pay heed to the concerns of the working class will only be an incomplete one. The social realities of this self-proclaimed global city are best captured from the following passage:

“ More than 700 disputes continue to fester following a rash of strikes that first broke out in July. At a Hyundai Heavy Industries shipyard in Ulsan, where walkouts resumed after wage talks collapsed, a striker died and three others were seriously injured when a driver, whom they had beaten, got back into his truck and ran them over. Some 13, 000 strikers occupied the yard, smashing windows, setting fire to cars and battling riot police. Late in the week police raided Hyundai and a second occupied plant and dragged away 200 strikers. Alarmed by the disturbances, Kim and Roh vowed to push for revision of South Korea’s labor laws, which largely favor management” (Hieyeon, 2000).

What we gather from the above description is a typical case of oppression of the working classes. Consistent with a Marxian view of the world, the legislative climate in Seoul is loaded heavily in favor of vested corporate interests, undermining democratic progress. Until such social inequalities are

addressed earnestly, Seoul's image to the world community will remain tarnished and any pretences of being a truly global city will only be such (Hieyeon, 2000).