

# A “Millennium” Chinatown in Seoul: The First “Modern” and “Clean” Chinatown in the World

Development Committee

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The first “modern” and “clean” Chinatown will emerge in Korea, a country where even a Chinatown of the old fashion was gone a long time ago. Given the geographic proximity and historical relationship of Korea and China, it is surprising to know that South Korea is probably one of the few countries in the world with no Chinatown. Still forming the only one ethnic minority group in the nation, the Chinese population in Korea has dwindled from more than 100,000 to merely 22,000. Due to the legal and social discrimination against them, the Chinese minorities opted for the exodus to overseas territories during the 1970s. With its population shrunk, the Chinese community witnessed the disappearance of their Chinatowns in several Korean cities. Above all, since they were not legally allowed to own the land, their economic activities vanished incrementally, including the Chinese restaurant business on which they used to have monopoly to a degree. In the late 1980s, however, a new turning point was made along with the rapid improvement of the Korea-China relationship. The more people of the two countries visited each other, the more exchange occurred across the Yellow Sea.

### **Progress Report**

In 1997, celebrating the fifth anniversary of the Korea-China diplomatic relationship, I wrote a newspaper article in which I claimed that in order to facilitate the two countries' synergetic partnership, we, both Korean government and people, make conscious efforts to help the Chinese to build the Chinatown in the country with no Chinatown yet. This voice was not sincerely heard until the financial crisis of the nation. Now the Korean started to pay attention to Chinese capital, which deemed to be the alternative to Western capital. As its gateway, building a Chinatown was recognized as a pre-condition for inducing Chinese capital. Meanwhile, many ethnic Chinese came to see me with tears in the eyes to explain the tragic stories of their own fate and the Chinatown; moreover, they claim that since their community was divided over the ideological issues, decades-long regionalism, and generational conflicts, someone like me, who was a local Korean with passion and enthusiasm

for their future destinations as well as some influence on Korean society, should play the central role in rebuilding it.

In 1998, the government, in effect, asked me to serve as an advisor for inducing foreign investment; in particular, I helped local governments to plan the restoration of their own Chinatowns and bring foreign investment for them. Interestingly enough, a sort of fever to build a Chinatown was brought about in a number of localities, including Seoul, Suwon, Inchon, Dague, Jeju and so on. During the government service, I came to realize that the Chinatown project be carried out by the business sector with the government's support, but not the other way around. Reviewing the response of the overseas Chinese investors to the previous proposals, I found out that its location should be in the Seoul Metropolitan Area; if possible, it should be located between the international airport and the central business district.

In April, 1999, I organized the Seoul Chinatown Development Committee together with Chinese community leaders and Korean civil activists. In September, the committee, a non-profit organization, hosted an international symposium on "The Overseas Chinese Network and Chinatown," where it officially proposed that the project's site be Tukdum, Sungsu-Dong, Sungdong-gu, northeastern part of Seoul. A couple of months ago, I already began to talk with the mayor of the Seoul Municipal government for the project; since Dong-A Daily's first report on it, a number of major media both inside and outside of Korea, publicized our "modern" and "clean" Chinatown. At the same time, the committee sought for the support from overseas Chinese communities, such as those of Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada, Japan, and as well from both Chinese and Taiwanese governments. Some Chinese delegations visited Seoul to investigate the project and its proposed site.

By far, the project essentially formed part of civic activity, which meant that no business aspect was seriously taken into account. Now that the committee had problems with fund and manpower for its operation and that foreign investors began to take the project as a serious business, it decided to establish a corporate entity that was to constitute a project

management company. In September, 1999, the Seoul Chinatown Development Co., Ltd. was established with the seed money from local investors. In October, the Fifth World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention, Melbourne, Australia, invited the committee to make a presentation on the Chinatown, where five people from the committee, including one overseas member, participated. However, it became crystal-clear to us that the project entailed a tremendous amount of time and money to carry out; in other words, it was beyond the capacity of a professor who had ideals alone.

That summer, a Singapore businessman came to Seoul and asked me to join his internet business: the CBN, which was originally formed by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Singapore but later spin off. Although I did not accept his proposal, I opened my eyes on the value of the internet in the IT age; eventually in early 2000, I set up a venture company to run a web site as a cyber Chinatown whose URL is [www.Mchinatown.com](http://www.Mchinatown.com) - here, M stands for a millennium. To a great extent, this Chinese-language site contributed to the expansion of the so-called "Korean Wave," a cultural phenomenon in China and other Asian countries in which Korean popular cultures, such as its TV drama and hip-hop music in a Korean style, enjoyed enormous popularity among the local people. Still today, it provides the Chinese netizens with the up-to-date information of Korea's entertainment and the cyber space for electric commerce.

Around the middle of 2000, the Seoul City Hall suggested that we participate in its project of building the Digital Media City which aimed to be the IT hub of East Asia. Because we claimed from the outset that our Chinatown differed from those of the old type, that is, ours was supposed to be a "modern and clean" Chinatown, we immediately asked our Chinese partner, Qinghua University Enterprise Group, a holding company that controlled a group of companies affiliated with Qinghua University, to investigate its feasibility; with their positive opinion on it, we finally submitted a letter of intent to invest in a Chinatown inside of the Digital Media City, which was located next to the Sangam Soccer Stadium.

When we began to prepare for the participation in Seoul City Hall's project, the governor of Kyonggi Province, which surrounded the territory of Seoul City, proposed that the province do its best to help to build the Chinatown; thus, we investigated the site suitable to our project. After the intensive consulting with our overseas contacts, including Li Kaixing's Whampa Hutchison Company of Hong Kong, we decided that Ilsan, a new town built together with southern Bundang, should be the right site for the project; in November, the company submitted a business proposal for the Chinatown to the provincial government. Finally in April, 2002, it obtained the exclusive right to the land development of approximately 76,000 sqm for the project.

### **Project Overview**

1. Location: Ilsan-gu, Goyang City, Kyonggi Province
  - in the site of the ancillary supporting facilities of the Korea International Exhibition Center (KIEC), a national project of Korea which is now under construction.
  - in the northwestern Seoul Metropolitan Area
2. Land Area: 76,00 sqm
  - first phase: 43,000 sqm
  - second phase: 33,000 sqm
3. Project Period: 2003 to 2009
  - first phase: 2003 to 2005
  - second phase: 2006-09
4. Facilities: two hotels for tourist and business purposes, China Streets with 300 shop-houses of the Chinese style, a modern shopping mall, a Chinese garden with the theme of the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, the Sino-Korean Digital Business Tower of a commerce-business-residence complex, and finally China gates, symbolic features of Chinatowns.
5. Site Location
  - 30-minute drive from Incheon International Airport and 20-minute drive from Kimpo Domestic Airport
  - 30-minute drive from the CBD of Seoul
  - located next to the Ilsan Lake Park with the largest man-made

lake in Asia

Picture 1. Location Map



Picture 2. Land Use Plan for KIEC and Chinatown



Picture 3 & 4. Bird's View



### **Key Concepts**

Our “modern” and “clean” Chinatown may be understood in connection with the coming of the new century which is marked by the knowledge-based information age, by the era of network, or by the emergence of the culture industry as the key sector of the world economy. By “modern,” I mean not only the departure from the old Chinatown in which early immigrants were eking out an existence amid crowded streets, buzzing with stalls and steaming noodle stands but also the creation of a business infrastructure for a new form of Asian culture on the basis of dynamic cross-border transactions between China and Korea. By “clean,” I simply mean that the Chinatown is a planned one contrasting with the old one that has naturally evolved over the long period of time.

In this context, the key word for the development of the planned Chinatown is “culture.” Firstly, the economic value of culture become more appreciated than ever before; in particular, entertainment and shopping come to combine together in marketing. Secondly, in the knowledge-based information society, the added value of culture rapidly grows thanks to its distinctive feature of one-source and multi-use. Finally, while the nineteenth century witnessed not only to the collapse of sovereign states but also the crisis of civilization in East Asia in front of the intrusion of Western colonialism, those of the new century are to rebuild the confidence in their own civilization; instead of simply “returning to Asia,” however, they will have to create a new millennium Asian culture on the basis of their past experience with Western culture as well as the culture of the so-called Third World. To be sure, culture is to constitute the key word for building the Millennium Chinatown in Seoul.

In order to capitalize on the value of culture in the Chinatown, we need to combine several functions for synergetic effects. Firstly, it is necessary to provide comfortable environments for people with different languages and life styles; in the Chinatown, for instance, the Chinese will stay in a hotel where their own language service and food are available. Secondly, as for the function of tourist attraction, the Chinatown is supposed to constitute a “living museum” both for Chinese visitors, either tourists or businessmen, and for Korean locals; in other words, people

with different looks and languages may serve for themselves as the most important element to draw tourists. Due to such a nature of the Chinatown, for example, the Yokohama one in Japan has been more successful than the Disneyland of Tokyo in attracting tourists. Finally, since the culture industry is essentially based on creative manpower, research and educational facilities will be systematically provided in the Chinatown. This may account for why the new Chinatown goes beyond the status of tourist attraction. By the same token, financial institutes, including venture capital companies, will have to be included in the facilities of the Chinatown in order to assure the financial support for the culture industry. All these facilities will be located inside of the landmark building of the Chinatown, called as the Sino-Korean Digital Business Tower, which is a commerce-business-residence complex.

At this moment, the contents of the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* will constitute the integrated concept for the culture of the Seoul Chinatown. Over the hundreds years, the popular classic was favored by all the peoples who commonly used Chinese characters. Although it came from China, it is thus considered as one of the classics for the Asian civilization as a whole. In the Chinatown, there will exist a Chinese garden with the theme of the *Romance*, containing the headquarter office of the Long'gang Association, an international non-profit organization composed of people with the family names of Liu, Chang, Guan, and Cho, that is, those of four main characters in the book, the exhibition hall of the wax figures with theme of the classic, and rooms for digital games with its contents, and the pavilions of the three kingdoms. And the contents of the *Romance* are also good for understanding a diversity of regional features in Chinese culture. The three kingdoms, in effect, were respectively representative of three different regions' political hegemony. This concept will lead us to taste different tastes of Chinese food in the China Streets: Beijing, Shanghai, Sichuan, Hunan, Guangdong, Chaozhou, Kejia, and Northeastern styles of food. In this context, the *Romance* will be the key concept to the contents of both China Streets and Chinese Gardens.

## **Permanent Resident Rights and Globalization**

When we launched the Chinatown project, frankly speaking, we did not think of the human rights of the ethnic Chinese in Korea; some pragmatic issues, such as Chinese capital, were alone in our mind. While working on the project together with the ethnic minorities, we came to realize that we should give priority to their human rights in our working agenda. Even from a practical point of view, the human rights issue should be taken into serious consideration; without the improvement of their legal and social status, the Chinatown will not survive after all because it is ultimately for, by, and of the ethnic Chinese.

In early 2000, we organized a taskforce team to study the legal status of the long-term residents in Korea. After months of work, we came to conclude that the most urgent task be to help them to obtain the legal rights to the permanent resident status in order to avoid the encroachment upon their human rights; through a series of meetings with the Chinese community, we confirmed that it was what they wanted most. Having found out their legal needs, we formed an alliance with several prominent NGOs, including the Lawyers for a Democratic Society, Minbyun. In July, 2000, we held a symposium on “Globalization and Human Rights: The Legal Status of Chinese Minorities in Korea,” which succeeded in drawing the attention of the mass media to the issue. At the end of the year, we submitted the parliament a proposal to enact the permanent resident rights of long-term sojourns. As we had expected, it did not go well; eventually, we approached to politicians for the enactment. In March, 2001, the conference for the establishment of the permanent resident status was held in the National Assembly Building with the support from the two major parties; as a matter of fact, we had already secured the support from the leaders of both parties, including the president Kim Dae Jung and the chairman Lee Hoi Chang. Under these favorable circumstances, the bill for the “green card” was forward to the parliament.

Our efforts, however, faced the oppositions from many parts of Korean

society, including the Ministry of Law. Above all, hostile nationalism pervaded with remarkable resilience in Korea, which, in turn, did not allow for ethnic diversity. While they supported the ethnic Koreans' efforts to obtain the right to vote in municipal elections in Japan, the Koreans were ironically still reluctant to protect the human rights of ethnic minorities in their society, despite the great progress of their own democratization. Even though the media and the public opinions tended to link the human rights issue of the ethnic Chinese in Korea to the ethnic Koreans in Japan, we intentionally separated the former from the latter in order to avoid any emotional debate over our movement. In the process of improving the legal status of the ethnic Chinese, we also built a rapport with a Japanese NGO; as a matter of fact, some concerned Koreans in Japan had already organized a research team to study the socio-economic status of the ethnic Chinese in Korea.

From May, 2002, the status of a permanent resident was granted to the ethnic Chinese if they wanted. Although the bill was never passed in the parliament, the Ministry of Law gave up to the public pressure. As a result, it changed the pre-existing system regarding to the departure from and entry into the nation so that the long-term residents could stay without visa applications for an unlimited period; now it is also preparing for the rectification of related legal codes further to assure the legal status of the alien residents.

To be sure, the establishment of the permanent resident status for the ethnic Chinese will not only facilitate the Chinatown project but also Korea's efforts at globalization. In the early 1990s, the term of globalization was widely recognized in Korean society; still it was understood merely as Korean companies' and people's going abroad. Diversity of society and open mind of individuals, the essential features of globalization, have not been fully appreciated by Koreans; in other words, "inward globalization" does not walk in hand with "outward globalization." In this context, it is worth to learn from Confucius who, in his *Annals*, says, "Be harmonious but not identical!" Being harmonious allows for diversity inside of Korea and the co-existence with the world outside of it. Not being identical, on the other hand, means that they

should not lose their cultural identity under the influence of globalization and simultaneously not force their ethnic minorities to be such identical ones that they are.

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