Joseon's Royal Heritage
500 Years of Splendor
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INTRODUCTION

The Joseon Dynasty, ruled by an unbroken line of 27 kings from 1392 to 1910, was a time of great cultural development for the Korean nation. As with any royal dynasty, some kings were better than others, and the foreign invasions of the 16th and 17th centuries were an especially difficult time for the kingdom. Taken as a whole, however, the Joseon Dynasty provided Korea with five centuries of political and social stability, which in turn allowed for great cultural development. It was during this dynasty that many aspects of what is now considered Korean traditional culture—Confucianism in particular—took root and flowered.

This book will examine three of the better-known areas of Joseon cultural heritage: Seoul’s royal palaces, the Joseon royal tombs, and the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*. Each of these treasures, deeply imbued with Joseon’s Confucian culture, reveals unique aspects about the kingdom and its legacy.

Standing in the heart of Seoul’s old downtown—which itself still largely follows the original plans set down by King Taejo when he established his new royal capital in 1394—the five royal palaces are
more than just buildings; they are architectural expressions of Joseon society and its ruling philosophy. The oldest and the largest, Gyeongbokgung, is one of the city's most recognizable landmarks, but even it cannot hold a candle to its slightly younger brother, the exquisite Changdeokgung, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the pinnacle of Korean traditional architecture and landscaping.

The royal tombs of the Joseon Dynasty—40 final resting places of Joseon kings and queens scattered about 18 locations in Seoul and the surrounding province of Gyeonggi-do—are unique in their completeness. Through their layout, location and motifs shed much light on the world view shared by the kings of Joseon and their subjects.

Finally, the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*, which have experienced a dramatic history, especially over the last century. These records are unequalled in their richness as a source of historical and cultural information about Korean history. With technology providing greater public access to these priceless documents in recent years, the *Annals* have even begun to provide inspiration to the artists of today.
"Palace architecture is a unique form of architecture that defines what Korean architecture is.... The palaces are a mini-museum of Korean architecture and landscaping."

Robert J. Fouser
associate professor, Seoul National University
Over the course of Korea’s 5,000-year history, the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) has stood at the forefront of Korean culture, especially in terms of the brilliance of its royal culture. Indeed, the royal palaces of this era are among the country’s most cherished national treasures and cultural relics.

A palace is the king’s home. But the “palace” concept, as seen from the historical documents of the Joseon Dynasty, is much broader; it includes the places where the king resided, where he lived before he became king, and where he stayed while traveling the country, and even the shrine built for royal ancestors. There are five official Joseon palaces where the king resided and conducted formal business: Gyeongbokgung, Changdeokgung, Changgyeonggung, Gyeonghuigung, and Deoksugung (or Gyeongungung). But it was only for about a single decade that all five of these palaces existed at the same time.
Gyeongbokgung, Changdeokgung, and Changgyeonggung (an annex to Changdeokgung) served as the primary palaces prior to the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1952, while Changdeokgung, Changgyeonggung, and Gyeonghuigung became the main palaces thereafter. Deoksugung was not really a Joseon palace, but an expansion built in preparation for the proclamation of the Deahan Empire in 1897.

Although several Joseon Dynasty palaces remain intact, Gyeongbokgung is especially noteworthy. Originally built in 1395, it served as the first and primary palace of the Joseon Dynasty. The main gate faced the Yukjogeori (“Six Ministry Avenue,” today’s Sejong-ro), while to the rear of the palace stood Mt. Bugaksan and Mt. Inwangsan, making it an ideal site in terms of feng shui (pungsu in Korean) principles as well as its picturesque natural scenery. As