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Soul of Seoul

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Introduction

Seoul is a city of mesmerizing juxtapositions—a place where five-hundred-year-old palaces glimmer in the shadows of gleaming skyscrapers, where the echo of a traditional bamboo flute might mingle with the pulse of K-pop spilling from a boutique café. To set foot in the streets of South Korea's capital is to step into a living dialogue between past and future, an urban tapestry intricately woven with the threads of heritage, resilience, and exuberant modernity.

Welcome to *Soul of Seoul*. This book is an invitation to journey far beyond tourism's surface, into the vibrant, hidden heart of one of Asia's most dynamic cities. Whether you are a first-time visitor, a longtime devotee of Korean culture, or simply curious about what makes this city tick, you'll find here a curious traveler's guide, a storyteller's map, and, perhaps, a spark of inspiration to see Seoul—and the world—afew.

Seoul's story is one of transformation. Born on the banks of the Han River, its origins are steeped in myth and royal intrigue. The city's evolution has been marked by waves of conquest, occupation, war, and breathtaking recovery. Today, Seoul stands as a global megacity, yet its ancient soul persists in the quiet lanes of hanok villages, the incense drifting from Buddhist temples, and the care lavished on a bowl of steaming kimchi jjigae. Modernity races ahead, but tradition is never left far behind.

To discover the true essence of Seoul, one must experience its living culture—the vibrant nights of Hongdae, where young musicians busk beneath neon signs; the bustle of Gwangjang Market, bursting with the aroma of sizzling pancakes and tangy fermenting kimchi; the serenity of a hidden courtyard teahouse in Ikseon-dong, offering respite from the urban rush. It's found in the intergenerational stories of families, the innovations of tech entrepreneurs, the expressive beauty of hanbok, and the infectious energy of K-pop and K-drama taking the world by storm.

This book is both a field guide and a love letter, blending immersive storytelling, first-hand discoveries, interviews with locals, and vibrant imagery to reveal the layers of Seoul that many overlook. Along the way, you'll meet chefs transforming tradition, artists challenging conventions, students navigating intense social pressures, and visionaries reshaping what the city—and Korea—can become.

Seoul is not a city easily summarized; it is complex and ever-shifting, at once deeply rooted and restlessly innovative. By delving into both its celebrated icons and its secret corners, *Soul of Seoul* aims to illuminate a metropolis whose soul is defined not by static landmarks but by creativity, resilience, and the enduring spirit of its people.

The journey begins here—let's discover the real Seoul, one story at a time.

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CHAPTER ONE: Founding Myths and Seoul's Ancient Origins

Every city has a beginning, a seed from which its identity sprouts and flourishes. For Seoul, this origin story is not a single, clear-cut historical event but rather a tapestry woven from threads of myth, early settlements, and the strategic choices of ancient kingdoms. To understand the soul of Seoul, we must first journey back to these primordial moments, exploring the legends that shaped a nation's identity and the very first footsteps that marked this significant land.

Long before Seoul became the bustling megacity it is today, the area along the Han River was home to prehistoric communities. Archaeological evidence suggests human habitation in this fertile river basin dates back as far as 30,000 to 40,000 years ago, with settled lives beginning in the Neolithic Age. The Amsa-dong Prehistoric Site, in present-day Gangdong District, offers a glimpse into these ancient times, with remains dating back 3,000 to 7,000 years, showcasing early human activity in the region. As the Bronze Age dawned around 700 BCE, settlements gradually expanded from the riverbanks further inland, laying the groundwork for more complex societies.

The broader narrative of Korea's foundation begins with the legendary figure of Dangun Wanggeom, whose story is deeply etched into the national consciousness. According to Korean mythology, Dangun founded Gojoseon, the first Korean kingdom, in 2333 BCE. This foundational myth speaks of Hwanung, the son of Hwanin, the "Lord of Heaven," who yearned to live among humans on Earth. Given permission by his father, Hwanung descended to Mount Taebaek with 3,000 followers and established Sinsi, the "City of God."

Hwanung, a benevolent divine figure, governed the human world, establishing laws and moral codes, and teaching humans various arts, medicine, and agriculture. His tale takes a captivating turn with the arrival of a tiger and a bear, both of whom desired to become human. Hwanung presented them with a challenge: endure 100 days in a cave, consuming only mugwort and garlic, and they would transform into humans. The tiger, lacking patience, failed the test and fled, but the bear persevered. After 21 days, she emerged transformed into a woman named Ungnyeo, or "Bear Woman."

Ungnyeo, now human, longed for a child. Moved by her prayers, Hwanung took her as his wife, and she gave birth to a son: Dangun Wanggeom. Dangun is said to have ascended to the throne, built the walled city of Asadal near Pyongyang, and named his kingdom Joseon, which is now referred to as Gojoseon to distinguish it from the later

Joseon Dynasty. While Dangun is a mythical figure, his legend is interpreted by some as a reflection of the sociocultural conditions during the kingdom's early development, and he is widely regarded as the progenitor of the Korean people. The third of October is celebrated annually in South Korea as National Foundation Day, commemorating Dangun's founding of Gojoseon.

Moving from myth to more discernible history, the area that is now modern-day Seoul gained significant prominence during the Three Kingdoms period (circa 57 BCE to 668 CE). This era saw the Korean Peninsula divided among three rival kingdoms: Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. The Han River valley, where Seoul is situated, was strategically vital due to its central location and easy access for transportation. Controlling this area often meant strategic control over the entire peninsula.

Baekje, one of the three kingdoms, was founded in 18 BCE by King Onjo, the third son of Goguryeo's founder, Jumong. Onjo led a group of people south to the Han River basin, establishing his capital city, Wiryeseong, within the boundaries of modern-day Seoul. Baekje initially started as Sipje, meaning "Ten Vassals," and gradually absorbed surrounding states to become a full-fledged kingdom. Archaeological sites like Pungnap Toseong and Mongchon Toseong, both earthen walls in southeastern Seoul, are believed to be remnants of early Baekje settlements. For nearly four centuries, Baekje held sway over the southwestern part of the Korean Peninsula, at its peak extending as far north as Pyongyang.

Silla, another of the Three Kingdoms, was traditionally founded by Bak Hyeokgeose in 57 BCE around present-day Gyeongju. Legend claims Hyeokgeose hatched from an egg laid by a white horse. Silla began as Saro-guk, a statelet within a 12-member confederacy known as Jinhan, eventually expanding its influence and becoming a centralized aristocratic state. Silla's long history saw it constantly vying for control with its neighbors, Baekje and Goguryeo.

The region of Seoul itself served as a hotly contested borderland between these competing powers throughout the Three Kingdoms period. While Baekje initially held strong ties to the area, it was eventually dislodged. The strategic importance of the Han River Valley meant that control of Seoul was a constant prize.

Centuries later, as the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392 CE) rose to power, the area now known as Seoul continued to be recognized for its strategic significance. In 1104 CE, King Sukjong of Goryeo built a palace near what is now Gyeongbokgung, referring to the area as Namgyeong, or "Southern Capital." This marked a period where Seoul began to grow into a city of political importance.

The true establishment of Seoul as the undisputed capital of Korea, however, came with the dawn of the Joseon Dynasty. The late 14th century saw the Goryeo Dynasty in decline, plagued by internal power struggles and external incursions. General Yi Seong-

gye, a military leader who had earned popularity by driving away foreign invaders, seized the opportunity. In 1392, he overthrew the Goryeo Dynasty and founded a new one, naming it Joseon.

As the first monarch of Joseon, King Taejo (Yi Seong-gye) embarked on a crucial quest: to find a new capital for his burgeoning kingdom. After careful deliberation and consultations with government officials and Buddhist monks well-versed in geomancy—the traditional Korean practice of discerning auspicious sites—Hanyang (present-day Seoul) was chosen. It was considered a propitious location, nestled in a basin surrounded by mountains in all four directions, with the Han River flowing through its heart. This choice underscored a new beginning, a break from the past, and a clear vision for the future.

The construction of Hanyang as the Joseon capital began in October 1394. The new city was meticulously planned, embodying Korean Confucian principles. The main palace, Gyeongbokgung, was built at the foot of Bugaksan Mountain, facing south. To its east, the Jongmyo Royal Ancestral Shrine was erected, and to its west, the Sajik Altar, creating a symbolic representation of a just ruler governing in consultation with his ministers. A massive circular fortress wall, roughly 20 feet high, was also constructed around Hanyang to protect its citizens from both wild animals and potential threats.

The early years of Hanyang saw rapid development. King Taejo ordered the construction of essential infrastructure, including roads and markets, laying the urban framework that would serve as the foundation for centuries to come. Although King Taejo's initial reign saw some instability, leading to a temporary relocation of the capital, it was quickly returned to Hanyang. This strategic move solidified Hanyang's status as the heart of Joseon, and it remained the capital until the dynasty's fall in 1910.

The selection and development of Hanyang as the capital of the Joseon Dynasty was a pivotal moment in Seoul's history. It marked the city's transformation from a strategically important but often contested territory into a planned political and cultural center. This deliberate act of creation, guided by both practicality and ancient wisdom, set the stage for Seoul to become the enduring capital of Korea, a legacy that continues to define its identity even amidst the most profound modern transformations.

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