The kingdom of Joseon (1392–1910) originated in a dramatic coup d'état whose story is known to all schoolchildren in South Korea today. The fall of the Mongol empire in the fourteenth century caused domestic turmoil in the Korean peninsula, just as its rise had done a century earlier. The Ming conquest of the Yuan in China in 1368 had the effect of intensifying internal divisions within Goryeo, the predecessor to Joseon that had been founded in 918. It triggered a debate in the court, with some remaining loyal to Yuan and others advocating support for the new Chinese dynasty. When the Ming threatened to claim part of Goryeo’s northern territory, the king supported a plan to invade the Liaodong peninsula in 1388. The pro-Ming Yi Seonggye (1335–1408) was one of the generals assigned to lead the invading force, but upon reaching Yihwa Island in the Amnok River, he turned his army around and returned to the capital, where he seized control of the government. A few years later, he deposed the last Goryeo monarch and founded a new kingdom that he named after the first kingdom on the peninsula, Joseon.

The founding of Joseon proved to be a major turning point in the peninsula’s history. It was not ancient enough to be celebrated for the formation of Korean civilization or romanticized as a primordial Golden Age. It could not claim to have unified the peninsula or even to have reunified the country after a period of disunity. Its historical significance lies in the fact that the new state adopted Neo-Confucianism as its ruling ideology, rejecting the Buddhism of the Goryeo kingdom. The transition from Goryeo to Joseon was also a significant moment in agricultural history, as farmers overcame the limitations of fallow-field farming and rice transplanting techniques were introduced. This combination of economic advance and the adoption of a new ideology led to a transformation over the next few centuries in which Confucian institutions, thought, and rituals penetrated the lives of not only the yangban aristocrats but also the peasantry.¹ The monarchy and bureaucracy were reorganized according to Neo-Confucian

principles, and institutions such as ancestor worship spread throughout the populace as the Confucian patriarchal family system expanded. These changes resulted in a polity that was one of the longest lasting in East Asian history, outlasting both of its contemporaries – the Ming dynasty in China and the Muromachi shogunate in Japan.

It is a cliché to say that traces of the past are everywhere, but the Joseon period remains as much more than traces and is still a vital part of everyday life in South Korea today. In fact, much of what South Koreans today consider to be ‘traditional’ Korea actually emerged in the Joseon era. When they think of traditional life, they envisage yangban elites wearing colorful silk clothes and commoners wearing the white garments favored at the time. They picture strongly patriarchal families, whether of royal or commoner lineage, that emphasized filial piety and women's subordination to men. Such images are reinforced by historical dramas set in the era that are among the most popular shows on South Korean television. They are just one example of how the Joseon period continues to be an intimate part of social and political life, imbuing it with the solemnity of tradition and thus giving it stature and prestige.

This book is a translation of a work that was first published in South Korea in 1996. It is the first of a two-volume book that was originally titled How Did People Live in the Joseon Period? It was an instant hit, especially as a college textbook, and went through more than ten printings, with a revised edition coming out in 2005. The book represented the culmination of efforts to introduce new paradigms into South Korean historiography. The authors, who are members of the Organization of Korean Historians (Hanguk yeoksya yeonguhoe), were part of a generation that engaged in collective research and attempted to write an alternate history of the Joseon era. Critiquing existing historiography, they shifted the focus of research away from the court and the elites and saw the common people, through their struggles against elite domination, as the true agents of history. This introduction gives a very short overview of the politics, economy, and society of the era in order to give readers the basic information necessary to understand the content of the book. It also discusses some of the major historiographical debates about the period and concludes with a brief examination of the meanings of the Joseon era during the modern period.

Overview of Joseon: Politics, Economy, Society

The Mongols' military campaigns for expansion in the thirteenth century led, directly or indirectly, to the fall of virtually all the major states in the