



Fires and fire prevention measures in Korea from 1392 to 1910



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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on fires and fire prevention measures in Korea from 1392 to 1910. Fires have been investigated on the basis of *The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* and *The Daily Records of the Royal Secretariat*, both a part of the Memory of the World Program in Korea. This study has produced “Chronology of Fires in 1392–1910”, a collection of fire incidents based on the two works noted above. This chronology identifies loss of human lives and damage to property caused by fires by year, period, place, primary cause of fire, and fire prevention measures. For private houses and government offices, the distribution of fire in each area was investigated; different results were revealed based on the population and characteristics of each historical document. Numerous fire ordinances and measures from the 1400s were found. Following the great fire in Hanyang in the early 1600s, roofs of private houses around the palace were replaced with tile. The king regarded the fire outbreaks as punishment for his own lack of virtue, the imbalance of yin and yang, and the heavens' warnings; thus, he authorized other fire preventive activities associated with folk beliefs. Generally, fire prevention measures from 1392 to 1910 can be classified according to fire prevention, alarm and fire suppression.

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1. Introduction

This study explores fires during the period from 1392 to 1910 and compares them with contemporary fire incidents. Historical information was obtained from *The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* [1] and *The Daily Records of the Royal Secretariat of the Joseon Dynasty* [2], both belonging to the Memory of the World Register, in which South Korea had nine entries as of 2012. Various architectural buildings that are designated currently as cultural heritages belong to the 1392–1910 period, during which they were used as living spaces. According to the claim by the modern philosopher Benedetto Croce that “all history is contemporary history”, current history involves analyzing the past history of humans. Therefore, analyzing past fire incidents on the basis of the two above mentioned texts to develop fire protection measures for current cultural heritages was a significant task.

The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty, a collection of archives including 2077 volumes from 1392 to 1863, was declared as the 151st national treasury by the Korean government in 1973; the collection was registered as Memory of the World by UNESCO in October 1997 (Fig. 1). The Annals represent a comprehensive collection of archives that report political, historical, and economic

events that occurred over 472 years, from 1392 until 1863. They are now stored in the Kyunjangkak Archives at the National University of Seoul and in the National Archives of Pusan (South Korea).

The Daily Records of the Royal Secretariat of the Joseon Dynasty (National Treasure no. 303) is the most extensive historical record, consisting of nearly 240 million letters dating from 1623 to 1910. As the Royal Secretariat was equivalent to a modern day office of the king's secretary, its diaries contain records of the management of royal orders, general administrative affairs, and court ceremonies (Fig. 2). Content was compiled every month, and monthly Gwongang, So-dae, Gae-jeong, and other affairs in the queen's inner palace were recorded in the preface to the monthly diaries. Listed specifically on a daily basis were the names of royal secretaries, scribes, and daily deputy officials and their attendances. Finally, the daily tasks of the Royal Secretariat toward the king and queen were included. Thus, the diaries cover the king's banquets, personnel affairs of the Royal Secretariat, reports from various ministries, and the king's commands. However, the diaries have not been preserved completely; some of the diaries were lost in fires, while other records for a period of 288 years have remained. A comparison of *The Daily Records of the Royal Secretariat of the Joseon Dynasty* with *The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* reveals that each has its pros and cons. Although the time period covered by records of the former is half that of the latter, the former is approximately five times longer than the latter. Both have become important sources for multidisciplinary studies, in which various scholarly subjects beyond Korean history are explored.

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Fig. 1. The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty.



Fig. 2. The Daily Records of Royal Secretariat of Joseon Dynasty.

Memory of the World as a historical record may be approached from the viewpoint of various subjects; in this study, it has been approached with a focus on fires that occurred from 1392 to 1910. The fundamental task in disaster prevention is to collect and analyze cases of accidents so as not to repeat a disaster. These historical materials indicate that the study of disaster preventive systems for buildings constructed during the 500-year period could be used as historical data on the disaster prevention of current architectural heritages.

2. Methodology

The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty (“*The Annals*”) written in Chinese characters, was difficult for the public to read. The translation into Korean begun in 1968 and was completed in 1993.

The Daily Records of the Royal Secretariat of the Joseon Dynasty (“*The Daily Records*”) are hand written books. This study has produced “Chronology of Fires in 1392–1910”, a collection of fire incidents based on *The Annals* and *The Daily Records*. In this chronology, human loss and property damage caused by fires have been examined and identified by year, period, place, the primary causes of fire, and fire prevention measures.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Fire statistics and cause analysis

The Daily Records date from 1623 through 1910, but only the records spanning 288 years—those from 1623 to 1910—have remained. Therefore, various records of *The Annals* and *The Daily Records* have been cross-examined. Discrepancies between accounts were revealed. Per *The Annals*, for example, events occurred a day later than *The Daily Records* indicated. Further a substantial difference was found between the number of fires recorded by *The Annals* and *The Daily Records*. *The Daily Records* recorded 2515 fires from 1626 to 1880, whereas *The Annals* recorded 233 fires during the same period. In particular, the numbers recorded for fires in private houses differed significantly, with *The Daily Records* and *The Annals* recording them as 2035 and 106, respectively. On the basis of these different numbers, different characteristics between *The Annals* and *The Daily Records* were identified; in other words, *The Daily Records* primarily recorded data on-site; whereas *The Annals* documented secondary data that had been selectively processed.

Fires were recorded using terms such as “accidental fire”, “disaster”, “fire”, and “arson”. Regarding fire incidents for which obvious causes were recorded, *The Annals* recorded 195 accidental fires, 14 cases of arson; accidental fires accounted for approximately 50% of all fires, whereas arson accounted for only 4%.

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