

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**MARTINA DEUCHLER**



MARTINA DEUCHLER  
PROFESSOR OF KOREAN STUDIES  
SOAS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

*The Review of Korean Studies* in cooperation with *Chöngsin munhwa yön'gu* (Korean Studies Quarterly) starts its serial interview aimed to introduce eminent Korean Studies scholars worldwide. In this first interview in series, we introduce Dr. Martina Deuchler of SOAS, University of London, who is well known for her distinguished researches in pre-modern and modern Korean history. This interview was originally done by Janice Kim and was first featured in the 1999 fall issue of *Korean Studies Quarterly* in Korean. It has been revised for this issue.

The Editorial Board of *the Review of Korean Studies* would like to thank Dr. Martina Deuchler for taking the time from her busy schedule to supervise the revision of the manuscript and congratulate her for being awarded the Yongchae Academic Award in March 2001. The Editorial Board also would like to give a special thank to Dr. Han Hong-Gu for his help in the revision.

The next issue will feature an interview with Dr. James B. Palais of University of Washington. (Editor)

## **An Interview with MARTINA DEUCHLER**

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She started learning Chinese characters after having seen an exhibition of Chinese art while still in high school. At the age of fifteen, she set forth on a quest to unravel the mysteries of ancient texts, pre-modern lives, and Classical Chinese.

Martina Deuchler, professor of Korean Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, continues her quest today, fifty years later, to unearth and to present the undiscovered in the history of pre-modern Korea. Born in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1935, Martina Deuchler's personal history is as impressive as her work. Having studied with "founding fathers" of East Asian studies like John K. Fairbank, Edwin O. Reischauer, and Maurice Freedman, she is one of the "last men standing" and certainly the last woman, in this lineage of academic legends.

Professor Deuchler, however, was not a mere first-generation follower of her Sinologist predecessors. Instead, she pioneered the field of Korean history and, in turn, became a trailblazer herself. Her dissertation from Harvard, published as *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys*, was one of the first scholarly books in English on Korea and with her most celebrated book, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, she was awarded the Chang Chi-yŏn Award for Korean History in 1993. Her most recent work that she co-edited is *Culture and the State in Late-Chosŏn Korea*.

Before her retirement, Professor Deuchler has granted an interview to discuss her life, work, history, and Korean Studies. Laughingly, she notes that the interview may cover more ground than intended. Pointing to the collection of *Yŏksa hakpo* in her office, she shows that her personal history more or less parallels the history of Korean Studies itself. Indeed, Martina Deuchler must have experienced most of the conflicts and vicissitudes of Korea's transformation over the last thirty years, and moreover the struggles of establishing Korean Studies in Western academia.

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## Personal and Educational Background

**Question:** To start off, could you give us some background information into how you became involved in East Asian and Korean studies? First, I heard that you started learning Chinese characters at a young age. I wonder if you can tell me whether or not this is true.

**Answer:** Well, I started to learn Chinese characters when I was fifteen because I was inspired by an exhibition of Chinese paintings and wanted to learn Chinese so that I could understand the social and cultural background of the paintings. I started clandestinely because a high school student cannot take courses at the university before age eighteen. But the professor of Chinese at the University of Zurich did not have many students and told me to come to his classes. So my eldest brother who was over eighteen registered for me. It was always risky because my teachers at the gymnasium (high school) were not supposed to know that I was taking courses at the university—especially when my grades at times slipped. But I was more interested in Chinese than in Latin.

**Question:** You received your BA from Leiden University in 1957 in Classical Chinese and Japanese. Could you tell us about your years there?

**Answer:** Earlier, Leiden University had been the training center for the interpreters of the Dutch empire, and in the 1950s was still an ideal place for cosmopolitan learning. I wanted to study with Professor J.J.L. Duyvendak, a famous Sinologist and translator of many ancient texts. Unfortunately, he died a few months before I took my final examinations in high school. In those days I was interested more in traditional than in modern China, as mainland China had been taken over by the Communists and become less accessible. I thus studied under Professor Duyvendak's successor, Professor A.F.P. Hulsewé who was a specialist of Han China and the author of *Remnants of Han Law*. Like Duyvendak, Hulsewé followed a textual approach to Chinese. In my first hour of Chinese I was confronted with the *Mencius*. I studied

Classical Chinese and Chinese thought. I also studied modern Japanese with Frits Vos. When I look back, it was an approach that would no longer be possible today. It was an entirely philological approach, much as we had learned Latin. I was taught to read the text, but not to analyse its social or political implications. Due to my pre-collegiate learning of Chinese, I received my degree in three instead of four years. In the end, I got a bit impatient with orthodox philological scholarship because I did not know where it would lead.

**Question:** Why and how did you make the transition from Leiden to Harvard?

**Answer:** At the annual Conference of Junior Sinologues (now the European Association for Chinese Studies), which was held in the Netherlands in 1957, I met Professor John K. Fairbank who was looking for students. He said to me: "If you come to Harvard, I shall make sure that you get a scholarship from beginning to end." Because I wanted to leave Leiden, this was a very attractive offer. I also received an offer from ANU (Australia), but my parents vetoed my going so far away. Thus, I chose Harvard. In the 1950s it was hard to get a student visa, and I lost more than a year waiting for mine. In the meantime I continued studying Chinese and especially English. Because I had learned ancient Greek in high school, my English knowledge was minimal. Finally, I started my studies at Harvard in the fall of 1959.

**Question:** In 1959, you began your studies for a Ph.D. in History and East Asian Languages, advised by Professor Fairbank in modern Chinese history and Professors Edwin O. Reischauer and Albert Craig in modern Japanese history. Could you give me your general impressions of Harvard? How did it differ from Leiden?

**Answer:** Well, the study methods at Harvard were very different. Whereas at Leiden I had received a solid philological training, at Harvard the emphasis was on getting the message out of the text. In my first year, I studied Qing documents with Professor Fairbank, and that was the first time that I read diplomatic documents of the eigh-

teenth and nineteenth centuries.

**Question:** It sounds as though your studies were more focused on the modern era during your graduate years.

**Answer:** Yes, of course, I studied modern Chinese and Japanese history. To study modern history was the purpose of my going to Harvard. At Leiden I had hardly learned anything about modern China. And from the early sixties the number of books on China gradually started to increase.

Personally, the transition from Leiden to Harvard was very tough, probably because of my insufficient command of English. Therefore I am so strict here at SOAS about writing skills. I am sympathetic with students who come with insufficient English, but it is crucial to make up for such deficiencies because historical research involves lots of writing. Before I had gone to Harvard, I had not written a single research paper! For my B.A. at Leiden I had to take more than twenty examinations, but all of them consisted of translations. Writing papers calls for different skills; it requires conceptualization, imagination, and logical arrangement of the subject matter. It is equally important to read around one's topic. But that was not encouraged at Leiden. When I think back, my education at Leiden was very valuable, but somewhat narrowly focused. Harvard therefore was a completely different experience.

On the advice of Professor Reischauer, I immediately started on my Ph.D. Thus, my major task was to prepare for the general examinations in modern Chinese history, modern Japanese history, and European intellectual history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I chose the latter reluctantly because I disliked going outside East Asia. But it was a requirement, and later I was glad to have widened my intellectual horizon.

**Question:** Can you tell us the reasons and procedures of your transition from Chinese to Korean Studies in your Ph.D. dissertation that dealt with the diplomatic history of nineteenth-century Korea?

**Answer:** I did not go into Korean studies consciously, but I was

undecided about a topic for my Ph.D. dissertation. As you may know, Professor Fairbank authored the famous book, *Trade and Diplomacy on the Chinese Coast*, and when I went to him to get some advice, he suggested that I do something similar for Korea. " Since you read Chinese so well, why don't you write about the opening of the Korean ports to foreign trade? You don't need Korean, the texts are all in Classical Chinese. "

So, I started out on the project. That was my first encounter with Korea. I began to read Korean diplomatic documents. At that time, however, there was hardly any Korean scholarship on the subject. (Pointing to her complete collection of *Yōksa hakpō*) By April 1963, only twenty issues of this journal had been published. It is incredible actually how little there was to read on Korea in those days. Because I wanted to consult the Korean scholarship on my topic as far as it then existed, I began to learn Korean. Professor Edward W. Wagner (who had received his Ph.D. in Korean history in 1959) was engaged in developing a Korean language textbook, and because it contained a lot of Chinese characters, it was not too difficult for me to acquire a modest grasp of modern Korean.

For my research, I had to read diplomatic documents in Chinese, Japanese, German, and English. I also went to Germany and here to the Public Record Office in London. I was the first to use the Jardine Matheson papers with reference to Korea kept at Cambridge University because I was also interested in the activities of early Western traders in Korea. After conducting extensive research for a couple of years, I submitted my dissertation and received my Ph.D. degree in History and East Asian Languages in 1967.

## **General Impressions of Korea**

**Question:** Did you ever visit Korea before you completed your Ph.D.?

**Answer:** No. Because I wanted to finish my dissertation first, which was a very good idea. Actually, I could not have done more for my dis-

sertation in the US. At that time, Korean history was still a very understudied field. Fairbank told me that I'd better go to Korea to work in Korean archives with sources that at that time had not yet been published. For this purpose, I received a Harvard research fellowship, and in 1967 I went to Korea. After my arrival, I immediately started researching in the Kyujanggak Archives housed in the old Seoul National University in Tongŏng-dong. You would not be able to imagine it anymore, but in those days I was reading and copying directly from the original *Ilŏngnok*, the most important source for late Chosŏn history. Nowadays, you are not even allowed to see, let alone touch, the *Ilŏngnok*.

**Question:** What was your first impression and how would you describe Korea's general condition at that time?

**Answer:** My first impression of Korea was like going back in time. It was stepping into the past! Life then was tough, especially for a woman. I had no privileges, and my living circumstances were difficult. But it was great, nevertheless, because I saw so many things that I had never seen before—and which cannot be seen any longer today. The people were generally very friendly and interested—very genuine. So I had good human contacts and made a lot of friends. In the Kyujanggak I met other students, but I was the only foreigner working there.

**Question:** How many foreigners or Westerners were around in Korea in 1967?

**Answer:** I could not say for all of Korea, or even for Seoul. I spent most of my time in the Kyujanggak and was alone until the early seventies when Bill Shaw and Susan Shin did research there. Occasionally, foreign visitors dropped by. Living in Myŏngnyun-dong, I did not see a Western face for weeks on end. But in the Library I got to know Korean graduate students, now well-known scholars like Yi Sŏng-mu, Han Yŏng-u, Yi T'ae-jin, among others. Despite my awkward Korean, we formed a small research group, which was very nice, and these con-



tacts are still alive today.

The Kyujanggak experience was very important. My time spent there allowed me to get to know the various directors of the Library, which proved very helpful. In 1967, Harvard-Yenching gave the Library the first Japanese-made photocopier, and I was always accommodated whenever I needed photocopies. But most of the time I copied my documents by hand, which was very time consuming.

I also took intensive Korean language lessons with a graduate student who majored in German literature. My condition was that we would not speak German. She became one of my best friends. We met every other day for two hours. Learning Korean was not easy because there were as yet hardly any textbooks. I am not sure whether Yonsei already conducted Korean language courses, but I did not want language tuition that would have interfered with my research time.

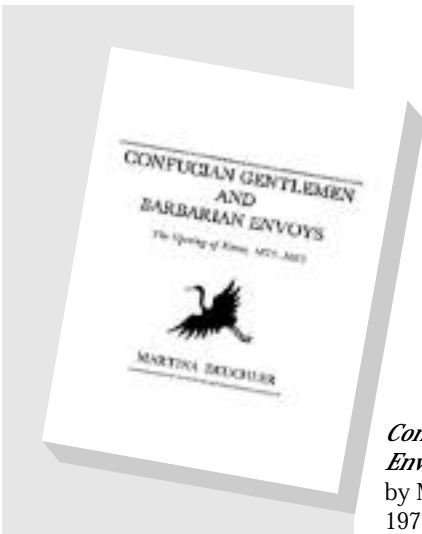
**Question:** Studying Korea over thirty years, can you elaborate on the changes in Korea during that time? Especially, what was your impression of the ‘ modernization process ’—economic, social, and academic?

**Answer:** During my first stay from 1967 to 1969, I took my first trips to the countryside, and rural Korea was even more “ medieval ” than Seoul. You can hardly imagine the countryside in those days. Everyone was still wearing traditional dress. The beauty of the country was overwhelming. It was just before the economic take-off, and I never thought that the country would develop so fast. Otherwise, I would have taken even more pictures than the 3000 slides I have now. I neglected to take pictures of many things because I thought that they would stay. Coming from Europe, I was used to “ development, ” but it was not as fast as what I saw in Korea.

Unfortunately, the modernization process has done away with so many things, so many customs. And it significantly changed the landscape. In the late 1960s, there were hardly any houses south of the Han River. Can you imagine? There were fields, rice paddies, and some orchards. They disappeared almost over night, and now there is a whole new city there.

Of course, at the time the Communist threat from the North was still

very alive, and it was government policy that people should move south of the river. I was in Seoul in January 1968 when North Korean agents attempted to assassinate Park Chung Hee. Since I lived so close to the Blue House, it was a very scary night when these people were on the run. The threat from the North was always there, and I remember that I received from the Swiss Embassy in Tokyo (there was no Swiss diplomatic representative in Seoul then) an A4-sized Swiss flag that I was supposed to show to hostile intruders.



*Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885*  
by Martina Deuchler, Univ. of Washington Press, 1977.

**Question:** Was your time in Korea from 1967-69 spent conducting research for expanding your doctoral dissertation that later became *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977)?

**Answer:** Yes, with the materials I collected in the Kyujanggak I expanded and enriched my doctoral dissertation for publication. But while I was doing this, I became very interested in social history and decided that after completing my work on Korean diplomatic history, I would switch to social history. At that time, I was already collecting my first documents that later become part of *Confucian Transformation*. At that point I did not know much about pre-modern Korean history and

had to go back to basics. I read Yi Ki-baek's *Han'guksa sillon*, but there were very few books in English or Korean on the topics I was interested in.

Not all my research was conducted in the Kyujanggak, however. Excursions to the various regions of Korea better informed and inspired my work. I especially enjoyed trips with students to various historically important sites under the guidance of Professors Yi Ki-baek and Yi Kwang-nin. One of the first trips was to Kyŏngju, then a sleepy little town. Nothing was as carefully preserved then as it is now. Transportation also was difficult. There were only a few buses, no highways, and the trains were very old. Though it was difficult, traveling in those days was a rewarding experience. Through these trips I not only learned to appreciate the different regions of Korea, but also made many friends.

### **Confucian Gentlemen and Confucian Transformation**

**Question:** Could you tell us about your relation to the late Maurice Freedman during your stay in Oxford in 1972, and the impact of social anthropology on your work on Korea?

**Answer:** On my way back to Switzerland in December 1969, I took a long trip via Japan and Taiwan and did some research in Japanese and Chinese archives. Upon my return to Zurich, I tried to find out whether I could get some more training in social anthropology. I wanted to study with Professor Maurice Freedman who then was teaching at the London School of Economics (LSE). He moved to Oxford in 1971, and this is why I went to Oxford in 1972. Freedman's interest in and support of my work was crucial. As a social anthropologist he was a pioneer in theorizing Chinese society. He stimulated my work on Korea because he always thought that Korea would be very important for understanding the larger context of East Asian societies. In those days, there was still very little written on Korean society, and my progress was very slow.

**Question:** Was your research stay in Korea from 1973 to 1975 more

fruitful as a consequence of your post-doctoral training at Oxford?

**Answer:** Yes, of course. At Oxford I received some basic ideas on how to go about developing my research on Korea's social history. I even wrote a few preliminary papers on the topic. With a research fellowship from the Swiss National Science Foundation, I returned to Korea. While in Korea, I not only collected materials for a new book on social history, I was also able to complete *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys* with the help of Sandra Mattielli who became my editor. Switching to social history was not easy, and without my Oxford training I would never have been able to find the critical approach to the subject, combining historical research with social anthropological theory. Of course, I started to revise my own views, and it was an arduous process of conceiving a framework for my writing.

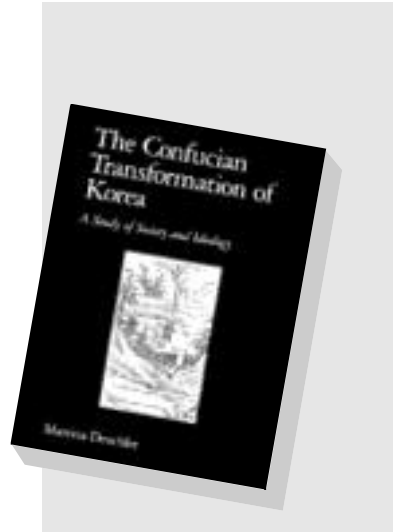
**Question:** So how did you go about writing *The Confucian Transformation of Korea—A study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Yenching Monograph, 1992)?

**Answer:** 1977 was the International Year of Women, and Sandy Mattielli urged me to write a piece on Chosŏn dynasty women—at the time a little researched topic. My first response was “no.” But in the course of my research, I realized that something very strange was going on and, finally, through examining women, I discovered the extent to which society was “transformed” during the early part of Chosŏn. After looking through the Koryŏ and Chosŏn law codes, I began to focus on how legislation affected gender-specific issues. Women's history in fact became a very important perspective, which significantly clarified my ideas and agenda.

**Question:** How did you balance research and teaching in Zurich?

**Answer:** My duties in Zurich were not very heavy. I began to lecture on Korea and prepared various presentations for workshops and conferences. I learned a lot from that experience. Moreover, with a few like-minded I founded the Association for Korean Studies in Europe (AKSE) in 1977. The originally annual (now bi-annual) meetings of this

association have become a very important forum for exchanging knowledge and friendship with European, American, and Korean colleagues.



*The Confucian transformation of Korea :  
A study of Society and Ideology* by Martina  
Deuchler, Harvard Univ. Press, 1992.

For myself, I underwent intensive self-training in Korean history and social anthropology. My first article on social history that later was incorporated into *The Confucian Transformation* was “ Neo-Confucianism in Early Yi Korea: Some Reflections on the Role of Ye ” (*Korea Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 5, May 1975) which I wrote at the very end of my second stay in Korea. More important was my first article on women in *Virtues in Conflict* (“ The Tradition: Women During the Yi Dynasty ” in Sandra Mattielli, ed., *Virtues in Conflict: Tradition and the Korean Woman Today*. Seoul: The Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 1977). A first attempt to present my general thesis on the impact of Neo-Confucianism on Korean society was “ Neo-Confucianism: The Impulse for Social Action in Early Yi Korea ” (*Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 2, 1980). And, finally, the article in which I demonstrated the importance of ancestor worship was “ Neo-Confucianism in Action: Agnation and Ancestor Worship in Early Yi Korea ” (in Laurel Kendall and Griffin Dix, eds., *Religion and Ritual in Korean Society*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1987).

**Question:** How have these books and articles been received by Western and Korean colleagues?

**Answer:** One important point I want to make is that I did not write these books in the first place for a Korean audience. If they stimulated interest in Korea as well, I am very happy. It is important for us Western scholars that our Korean colleagues take note of what we are doing. I hear that *Confucian Transformation* is being used in many East Asian survey courses in American and European universities, and it has found some recognition even in Korea. For this book I received the Chang Chi-yŏn Prize in 1993—a wonderful award.

**Question:** Have there been any critical voices?

**Answer:** Of course! I am very happy to hear critical voices because they prove that scholars here and abroad are taking my work seriously. My use of the term “primogeniture,” for instance, has caused some controversy. The term derives from English common law according to which the eldest son inherited all of his father’s property. In fact, this ideology was often softened by making special testamentary arrangements for younger siblings so that the eldest son inherited all of the patrimonial land, while his younger siblings, brothers and sisters, got equal shares of a parent’s personal property. This is exactly what eventually happened in Chosŏn Korea. I could confirm this on the basis of inheritance papers I have studied in preparation of my new work on landed elites.

**Question:** But what about your argument according to which Korea’s Confucianization was principally brought about by ideological factors?

**Answer:** I have never denied that economic and, of course, political factors were also important in the founding of the new dynasty. My major focus, however, was on Neo-Confucianism as an ideology of change. And the interesting point is that during the founding years Neo-Confucianism served as a key to social legislation that eventually

remade Korean society into a patrilineal society. This had, of course, important economic implications, but economic factors alone could never have transformed society in the way Neo-Confucianism did. For this reason I paid special attention to Confucian-style ancestor worship as the most vital mechanism for creating a lineage society.

A further important point is that at the beginning of Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism was used as a “practical” ideology (*sihakh*) for reforming state and society. It was much later, and only very gradually, that Neo-Confucianism was also studied as a philosophy with all its metaphysical intricacies. I think it is for this reason that Neo-Confucianism as a philosophy reached its peak in the sixteenth century with such outstanding thinkers as T’ŏgye Yi Hwang and Yulgok Yi I.

**Question:** But it is true that Korea became a more Confucianized society than China?

**Answer:** This would be a very misleading statement. I may have overemphasized this point earlier, but I have shown that in very crucial respects Korean social customs resisted Confucianization. Most important among them was the wedding ceremony that continued to be conducted, against Confucian dictates, in the house of the bride. Why? Because even during the Chosŏn dynasty *social status* continued to be determined bilaterally, that is, through the father as well as through the mother. This bilaterality was a powerful force that resisted the patrilineal bias introduced through Confucianism.

**Question:** Did the invasions of the Japanese and the Manchu at the end of the sixteenth and at the beginning of the seventeenth centuries have a significant impact on the process of Confucianization?

**Answer:** Both invasions were, of course, very destructive (just think of all the historical documents that were lost then!), but I increasingly get the impression that they did not have a significant impact on the Confucian transformation. In fact, I have come to believe that this transformation would have culminated in the course of the seventeenth century even without the wars. The major factor seems to have been

the growing shortage of land that led to an ever more unfavorable land/man ratio. I hope to show through my new research on landed elites that this was a major element for bringing about and consolidating the lineages which became typical for the latter part of Chosŏn.

Well, I hope to complete my new research soon so that all these questions can be answered in a more comprehensive way!

**Question:** What do you think Western and Korean scholars can do to improve their relations in the future?

**Answer:** Well, both should be more tolerant of and interested in the views of the other, and there should be more exchanges of views. Non-Korean methodological and theoretical frameworks can foster new impulses for thinking about history and historical research. One cannot get to the right questions without using a wide spectrum of views and perspectives.

### **Confucian Transformation and Women in Pre-Modern Korea**

**Question:** *The Confucian Transformation* has been described as a “women’s history,” by some. Similarly, you, as an expert on women’s history. What do you see as “traditional” Korean feminism? At the same time, do you think that this re-enforced gender inequality?

**Answer:** I have a forthcoming article (“Propagating Female Virtues in Chosŏn Korea”) on pre-modern Korean women in a volume entitled *Gender and Text in Pre-Modern China, Korea, and Japan: The Making and Unmaking of Confucian Worlds* (forthcoming, Berkeley: University of California Press), edited by Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan Piggott. The article shows that although elite women always lived under certain disadvantages, they also had historical agency and were instrumental in continuing and perpetuating the social system. Women’s influence went far beyond the inner chambers. Their authority over the socialization of their sons and their advisory roles to husbands indicate that women were integral actors in maintaining and



reinforcing the patriarchal Confucian social system.

The view of patriarchy as promoting a “negative” order for women is a quite outdated one that may have first been propagated by Protestant missionaries in Korea. Patriarchy need not be only negative. Sources indicate that by the eighteenth century a large number of women were educated, and *han'gul* had always been widely used by women. Though this may confound many conservatives, “education” does not need to be only based on literacy. There has been a long tradition of recitation. Because oral sources are fundamentally different from written ones, we must be careful in dealing with such information, but examined properly, the oral tradition gives evidence of education that goes beyond the bounds of literacy.

**Question:** Could you elaborate on your perspective on the relationship of Confucianism and gender, perhaps the blurred boundaries between “public” and “private” spheres of influence, and the more subtle power relations within society?

**Answer:** Confucianism does not deal much with women. The *Analects* hardly mention women. Rather than speaking about women’s suppression, there was a general ambivalence about women’s social roles. In my research on elite women of the Chosŏn period, however, I have found biographies and writings of highly influential women. Though common lore has it that a highly educated woman was bound to have a difficult or even tragic marriage, educated women were indispensable for rearing successful sons. Patriarchy did not discourage women’s education. Women, in fact, were just as responsible for perpetuating Confucian family ethos and forming “proper” attitudes.

Moreover, women, as the domestic managers, seem to have controlled the microeconomics of the household. Too many feminists in Korea seem to look for “exceptional” women who gained historical agency by going outside the system. But in actuality, Korean women are great precisely because they worked through the system. Of course, most of the available sources deal with elite women, and we know practically nothing about commoner women. I am sure we know more about the daily life of the slaves than of the commoners. Sources of

and by elite women, however, show that traditional Korean women maximized their power within the bounds of a Confucian social structure.



*Korean Women : View from the Inner Room*  
by Martina Deuchler and others, East Rock Press,  
1983.

## **Women in Korea Today and Prospects for the Twenty-first Century**

**Question:** On a more personal level, what was your experience, studying Korean history for over thirty years as a European and moreover as a woman?

**Answer:** It was, of course, not always easy. In Korean homes, there were instances when men did not want me around, and the women did not want me in the kitchen! This at times created awkward situations. But the fact that I was a Western woman scholar liberated me from the kinds of judgments Korean enforce on one another. Moreover, my Harvard degree often gave me a “man’s status.” Doing “man’s work” in the Library was not always easy. And there were no ladies restrooms in the old library building!

**Question:** What do you see as the future of Korean women? In your article published in *Virtues in Conflict* you stated that just as the tradition between Koryŏ and Chosŏn altered the social status of women, Korea in 1977 was in a similar period of transition. Twenty years since that article, do you feel that women in Korea have made progress?

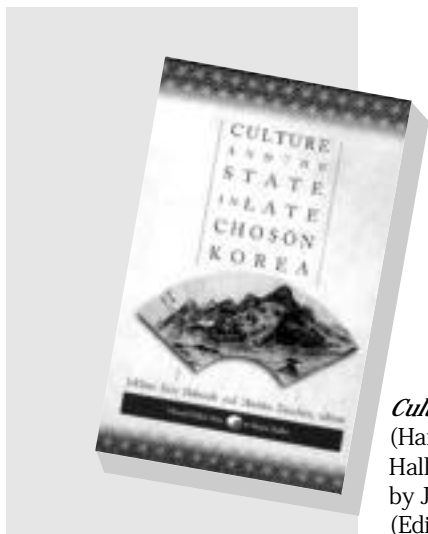
**Answer:** Superficially, many things are quite different today. People behave differently and dress differently. Beneath the surface, however, there is still much uncertainty about the women's role in modern society. Many women still subscribe to traditional views and in fact perpetuate the patriarchal system.

Paramount to the women's emancipation is, of course, a change in men's attitudes toward women, especially educated women. They must promote a system in which men and women have the same opportunities. The gender problem is a social, just as much as a demographic problem. In recent years, there were uneven gender ratios in the general population because boy preference is still very strong.

A significant factor for the future of women is also the transition of time. There exists a stark contrast between the generations. With the gradual disappearance of the older generation, the gap with the past and with Korea's history may further widen. I am naturally disturbed about the disappearance of Chinese characters; pretty soon, the younger generation will no longer be able to read its own history.

## **Works in Progress**

**Question:** Your most recent article ("Despoilers of the Way-Insulters of the Sages: Controversies over the Classics in Seventeenth-Century Korea") was published in a book you co-edited with JaHyun Kim Haboush, *Culture and the State in Late-Chosŏn Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). I also know that you have been working on a social and cultural history focused on the latter part of Chosŏn, based on the Reischauer Memorial Lectures you delivered at Harvard in 1995. Could you tell us about that work? Is your work in



*Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*  
(Harvard East Asian Monographs/Harvard-Hallym Series on Korean Studies, 182)  
by Jahyun Kim Haboush, Martina Deuchler  
(Editors), Harvard Univ. Press, 1999.

progress now a kind of continuation or elaboration of your *Confucian Transformation*?

**Answer:** My book in progress benefits much from my previous research, but whereas *The Confucian Transformation of Korea* concentrated on laws and regulations, I now look at the processes those laws initiated. I cover the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries and look at internal social developments, especially at the evolution of ritual before and after the Japanese invasions. Specifically, I am using documents pertaining to Andong and Namwŏn.

**Question:** Is your work then more oriented towards a local history approach, one that has been very useful in studying Chinese history?

**Answer:** Well, it is certainly possible to do that kind of local history in Korea. Customarily, Seoul has been the focus of historical attention and the countryside has been examined in relation to Seoul. My approach is studying social, economic, and political developments in the countryside and looking from the countryside to Seoul, from the periphery towards the center. My work, thus, will differ in perspective of analysis from Korean scholarship in this field.

I have been reading the personal works of many country scholars and have won insights into local thoughts and interests. Many local men were recruited to the capital, but most of them returned to their home bases, illustrating the importance of regionalism in Korean society. One of my main concerns is to explore the impact of rituals on the intellectual, social, and economic life of local elites.

I have also studied slavery. The elites of Chosŏn could not have existed without their slaves. During this research, I have been able to gather detailed materials on the social and economic functions of private slaves. My work on landed elites would be incomplete without an examination of slavery because the slaves were integral actors in pre-modern Chosŏn.

**Question:** I know that you have been involved in preparing the *Cambridge History of Korea*. Could you tell us about this project?

**Answer:** The work is still in progress. I have written two chapters, one on Koryŏ society for volume 2, and one on Chosŏn society for volume 3. Writing in a concise way for a wider reading audience is not easy, and I had to do a lot of additional research, especially reading the recently published secondary literature on Koryŏ. But, of course, an understanding of the social conditions of Koryŏ is crucial for an appreciation of Chosŏn. The *History* will eventually come out in four volumes.

## Teaching Korean Studies

**Question:** From 1975, you started teaching at the University of Zurich. Was there any interest in Korean Studies in Zurich? Seeing that you were able to write *Confucian Transformation* during that time, did you have more time for independent research?

**Answer:** As I have mentioned before, the research fellowship given by the Swiss National Science Foundation was indispensable for the completion of *Confucian Transformation*. There was quite a bit of interest, and Korean Studies became a minor for students. But I also had

the freedom of spending at least three months in Korea almost every year. Now that I look back, this was quite a privilege. I consider myself lucky to have had secure funding throughout that time when there were simply no positions in Korean Studies, either in Europe or in the States.

**Question:** Could you compare and contrast your teaching experience in Zurich with the atmosphere you found when you moved to SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) in 1988?

**Answer:** Korean Studies have undergone a huge takeoff in the last decade, and since I arrived at SOAS, the Korean Studies program has grown considerably. For many decades my predecessor, Professor Bill Skillend, was alone in teaching Korean language and literature. Now we are five specializing in various aspects of Korean Studies. Finally, before my retirement, I feel as though I no longer have to fight for Korean Studies. It was very difficult to gain acceptance for Korean Studies in Western universities.

### **Korean Studies: Past, Present, and Future**

**Question:** Your life and work covers more or less the history of East Asian and Korean Studies. Could you elaborate about the problems and issues of Korean Studies during its first thirty years?

**Answer:** Korean Studies have always had a difficult stand as a “minority” subject vis-a-vis Chinese and Japanese studies. Because of the modest size of the country, the lack of trained experts, and general ignorance, Korean Studies have always been marginalized. It has only been for the last ten years or so that historians of Korea are regularly invited to conferences and seminars on East Asia. The future of the field rests on making Korean Studies more visible and attracting the attention of China and Japan scholars. It is not in our best interest to limit our focus on Korea. Greater interaction with scholars in Chinese and Japanese studies will open yet another arena for discussion and

cooperation.

**Question:** How do you feel about the present disregard for “ area studies? ” What do you see as the pros and cons of discipline and area studies?

**Answer:** Area studies can still be justified inasmuch as languages remain the necessary prerequisites for East Asian studies. Nonetheless, area studies have indeed often to cover larger ground. East Asian Studies, and increasingly Korean Studies, have done well in balancing disciplinary and linguistic training. In terms of Korean Studies, theoretical grounding in various disciplines has markedly improved over the last ten years.

**Question:** As an adviser, what do you emphasize as an important prerequisite for preparing a doctoral dissertation?

**Answer:** The most important prerequisite for writing an original dissertation is having a good language background. For Korean history, for instance, this means acquiring a solid foundation in Classical Chinese. On top of this, a comprehensive knowledge of modern Korean and, if possible, of Japanese, is necessary. Moreover, I believe that reading within and outside one’s special field is essential.

**Question:** In the future, do you think that Korean Studies could become integrated into larger disciplines?

**Answer:** One of the reasons that East Asian studies have done well in comparison to other area studies is the fact that East Asian studies have had flexible policies. I have always been in a History Department as well as in the Korean Studies program. East Asian Studies at SOAS is a department, but most of the staff is affiliated with disciplinary departments. Harvard, UCLA, and other universities have similar systems. It should not be a matter of one over the other. Methodological and theoretical learning from disciplines will always be important for the future development of Korean Studies.

**Question:** How do you see the future of Korean Studies?

**Answer:** The future of Korean Studies will always depend on adequate funding. Institutions and researchers have to be supported by foundations and universities. We are doing our best to promote Korean Studies in Western academia, and we are most grateful for the funding we have been receiving from Korea. But equally important is an expanded dialogue between Western and Korean scholars. We can learn much from each other. After all, we share a deep and lasting concern for advancing knowledge about Korea.

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The loss of interest in pre-modern Korean history in the West and in Korea is intensified by the linguistic boundaries of Classical Chinese and Japanese. Korean history, traditional and modern, has been consistently encumbered by its diverse and severe linguistic demands. Although Korean history has never attracted the intellectually light-hearted, Martina Deuchler epitomizes the characteristically “ Korean ” spirit of tenacity. She asserts that her life, in every sense, has “ always been an enormous struggle. ”

In view of her achievements, however, one wonders whether the severity of the struggle yields a greater reward. With *Culture and the State in Late-Chosŏn Korea* just released, and her most recent book forthcoming, it looks as though she has saved the best for last. In describing her research experience in her preface to *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, she wrote: “ In venturing into the essentially uncharted territory of Korea ’s rich recorded past with no one to guide my first steps, many times, I lost my way or got entangled. ” This may describe many of the other struggles of her life, in paving the path for Korean Studies in the West, or in explaining the complexity of sixteenth-century Korean society, but now it looks as though she is closer to mastering the ways of her quest. Through her life and work, Martina Deuchler has helped to “ open ” Korean Studies and served as a “ foremother ” inasmuch as her life and work will leave a legacy for future studies of pre-modern Korea.

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## Chronology

- 1935 Born in Zurich, Swiss.  
1959 BA in East Asian Studies at Leiden University, the Netherlands.  
1967 Ph.D. in East Asian Language and Civilization at Harvard University.  
1967-1969, 1973-1975 Researcher at Kyuchanggak.  
1972 Special Researcher, Department of Anthropology, Oxford University.  
1975-1988 Professor, Korean History and Language, Zurich University.  
1988-2000 Professor, Korean History, SOAS, University of London.  
1993 Awarded the Chang Chi-Yŏn Award  
2001 Awarded the Yongchae Academic Award

## Publications

- “Propagating Female Virtues in Chosŏn Korea” In *Gender and Text in Pre-Modern China, Korea, and Japan: The Making and Unmaking of Confucian Worlds*, Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan Piggott eds. Berkeley: University of California Press. Forthcoming
- Culture and the State in the Last Chosŏn Korea*. JaHyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler eds. Harvard East Asian Monographs/182 Harvard-Hallym Series on Korean studies. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center. 1999.
- The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1992.
- “Heaven Does not Discriminate: A Study of Secondary Sons in Chosŏn Korea”, *Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 6, 1988-1989.
- “Reject the False and Uphold the Straight: Attitudes Toward Heterodox Thought in Early Yi Korea”, In *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*, Wm. Th. De Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush eds. New York: Columbia University Press. 1985.
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Korea”, *Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 2, 1980.

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“Neo-Confucianism in Early Yi Korea: Some Reflections on the Role of Ye”, *Korean Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 5, May 1975.