

*Professor Martina Deuchler:
the Swiss expert on Korean studies*



Prof. Dr. Martina Deuchler

When she was only 15 years old, Martina Deuchler visited an exhibition of Chinese paintings. She was so impressed with what she saw that she decided on the spot to devote her life to Chinese studies. Eventually she extended her interest to Korea and is today Switzerland's leading expert on Korean history and culture.

While still in high school, she started to learn the Chinese language. After receiving her diploma, she enrolled at Leiden University (Netherlands), where she studied classical Chinese and Japanese. In 1959, she received an invitation from Professor John K. Fairbank, the founder of modern Chinese studies in the United States, to continue her studies at Harvard University. For her doctoral dissertation, she chose to work on the opening of Korea's seaports to Japan and the Western powers at the end of the 19th century. It was thus diplomatic history that opened Mrs. Deuchler's door to Korea. In those days, very few documents on Korean history were available in Western libraries. Therefore, after completing her Ph.D in history and Far Eastern languages with a dissertation entitled "The Opening of Korea, 1875 - 1884" (published in 1977), she went to Korea to delve into the country's past in the Royal Archives. A decade after the Korean War, the Republic of Korea was still an agrarian country with little industry, and life was very difficult. Yet during that two-year sojourn, Mrs. Deuchler decided to change the focus of her studies to Korean social history. That was a decisive change that connected her to Korea for the rest of her life.

After she acquired some expertise in social anthropology at Oxford University, she returned to the Republic of Korea in 1973 to collect data on Korea's pre-modern kinship system. At the same time, she conducted fieldwork in a remote village where Confucian rituals were still regularly performed. These years of complete immersion in Korean culture were crucial for making her an expert on Korean Confucianism and pre-modern social history.

Mrs. Deuchler returned to Zurich in 1975 and started teaching Korean language and history at the University of Zurich with a grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation. Besides, she was preparing her "habilitation" and received the venial legend in classical Sinology and Korean studies with a dissertation entitled "Confucianism and the Social Structure of Early Yi Korea" in 1979. This work laid the foundations for her much acclaimed book "The Confucian Transformation of Korea: a Study of Society and Ideology" (Harvard, 1992). During her years in Zurich, she was active in many international scholar organizations and was one of the founders of the Association for Korean Studies in Europe (AKSE) established in London in 1977. Now with almost 200 members, AKSE has become the most important venue for Korea specialists from around the world.

Unable to receive a permanent position at the University of Zurich, Prof. Deuchler followed an invitation to teach Korean history at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London in 1988. Three years later, she was promoted to serve as full professor and director of the Centre of Korean Studies. During her 14 years in London, she was not only successful in expanding the centre into one of Europe's most flourishing teaching and research organizations on Korea, but also lectured widely in Europe, the U.S. and in the Republic of Korea. Her efforts for the promotion of Korean studies were variously honored: in 1993 she received the Wham Chang Chi-yon Memorial Award for Korean Studies; in 1995 the Order of Cultural Merit (Bungan), Republic of Korea; in 2008 the Korea Foundation Scholarship Award; and in 2009 the Distinguished Service Award of the Association for Asian Studies (USA). In 2006, she was elected corresponding Fellow of the British Academy.

Since her retirement, she has held several positions as a visiting professor in the U.S. and in Korea. A number of her works have been translated into Korean. She is now engaged in completing another large manuscript on the structure of the kin group in pre-modern Korea.

For over forty years, Prof. Deuchler has been a researcher of Korean history and a keen witness of Korea's astounding development into one of the world's foremost economies. Today, she is looking forward to the establishment of Korean studies as an integral part of East Asian studies in Switzerland. Both Switzerland and the Republic of Korea would certainly benefit from these cultural exchanges.