

Suzanne Crowder Han, long-term foreign resident of Korea, dies at 71

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Suzanne Crowder Han speaks in front of Habib House during the Royal Asiatic Society Korea Garden Party, June 1, 2019. Courtesy of Tom Coyner

By Jon Dunbar

Suzanne Crowder Han, a long-term foreign resident of Korea, died Monday morning surrounded by family after a short illness. She was 71 years old.

Suzanne first came to Korea in 1977, and except for two years away, she's lived in Korea ever since. She considered Korea her "second home," as she'd lived here longer than she had in the U.S.

"Suzanne was such an incredible person who had an amazing store of adventures she shared," said Jennifer Flinn, who had been a close friend for several years. "I learned so much about Korea and how to integrate enthusiastically and genuinely. From stories about drinking entire towns dry of 'makgeolli' in her Peace Corp days to her tireless work for Royal Asiatic Society (RAS) Korea, Suzanne was always living life to her fullest and helping other people."

In person, her personality came off as understated, but underneath that was an outstanding person who was always a joy to be around. Her legacy lives on in her contributions to Korea's literature translation, tourism and higher education.

"One of my personal goals has long been to help people learn about Korea," she stated in a bio on the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) website, where she had served as director until retiring last year.

Suzanne was born in the small town of Greenwood in South Carolina, on Sept. 5, 1953, and was an avid reader from a young age. She earned her degree in studio art at the University of South Carolina.

After entering the Peace Corps, she arrived in Korea in April 1977.

"I don't recall hearing much Christmas music on the streets when I first came to live in Korea in 1977," Suzanne [told The Korea Times in a 2021 interview](#) about Christmas decorations in Korea. "For my first year in Korea, shops were not well lit, there were no neon signs; many shop windows were lit by a single lightbulb dangling from the ceiling ... As Korea has grown and developed and become wealthy, traditions have changed."

After arriving, she underwent 10 weeks of training in Cheongju, North Chungcheong Province. She was dispatched to a health center in Chungju in the same province, which she considered to be her Korean hometown. She worked there on tuberculosis control. After that, she extended her stay and was sent to work at a maternal and child care center in Hongcheon, Gangwon Province.

In 1980, her time as a Peace Corps volunteer ended, and she decided to stay in the country. She continued training new Peace Corps volunteers until the program left Korea in 1981.

She was part of the team that helped draft legislation establishing the Korea International Cooperation Agency, which included World Friends Korea, modeled after the Peace Corps.

At the time of her death, she remained a vice president of Friends of Korea (FoK), an all-volunteer organization made up of mostly Peace Corps Korea volunteers, and until last year, she participated in the Revisit programs welcoming back Peace Corps volunteers to Korea.



Suzanne Crowder Han gives a speech during the farewell dinner for the Peace Corps Revisit program at Some Sevit in southern Seoul, Oct. 27, 2023. Korea Times photo by Jon Dunbar

"Her quiet demeanor and dedication to Korea helped guide FoK to extend its membership beyond Peace Corps Volunteers to include those who had a shared interest in fostering cultural awareness and friendship between Americans and Koreans," said Jim Mayer, also vice president of FoK and the final Peace Corps Korea country director. "She is a friend and always will be. Rest in peace, dear friend!"

In 1982, Suzanne won a commendation prize in the 13th annual Modern Korean Literature Translation Awards offered by The Korea Times for her translation of a short story by Han Mal-sook.

Describing the task of translating Korean literature as "very difficult but also fun," she explained how she figured out the right words to use.

"Often, over dinner or riding in a taxi, I would ask Korean friends what feeling and what image certain words or phrases brought to mind," she told The Korea Times. "It was somewhat like a game and, in such a way, I got a more cultural feeling for the words."

Also in 1982, she met her husband, Han Yun-sok, while playing darts at the Chosun Hotel. They married the following year and, years later, had a daughter, Minsu.

Throughout most of the 1980s, she worked for the Korea Overseas Informational Service (now the Korean

Culture and Information Service) under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs (now the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism). She continued working here as a writing consultant for most of the 1980s.



Suzanne Crowder Han in 1982
/ Korea Times Archive



Korea Times Photo

Awardees of the 13th annual Modern Korean Literature Translation Awards are seen in the audience during the awards ceremony held yesterday at the Korea Times-Hankook Ilbo Company auditorium. They are, from left, Ms. Chun Kyung-ja, the short story category winner, Ms. Suzanne Crowder and Ms. Yee Hyun-jae, two commendation award winners in the short story category.

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Suzanne Crowder Han, center, attends an awards ceremony for the 13th annual Modern Korean Literature Translation Awards at the auditorium of The Korea Times' building in central Seoul, Jan. 21, 1983. Korea Times Archive

In 1986, Korean publisher Hollym invited Suzanne to write for a pictorial guidebook on Korea, which was published in time for the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul and became a series.

"Her pictorial guidebooks of Seoul, Gyeongju and Jeju Island were instrumental in boosting tourism to those places," RAS Korea President Steven Shields said in a bereavement announcement. "Her book, 'Notes on Things Korean,' was a masterpiece of reflections on the culture from a Westerner's point of view and was helpful and respectful. I used it often for reference and gifted many copies to friends and acquaintances."

I still remember her vivid description of an early visit to Jeju Island, when she excused herself from the table to use the washroom, at which point someone handed her a stick. Puzzled, she asked what it was for. "For the pigs," was the cryptic reply. She didn't understand what that meant until she went out back and found that the outhouse

was overhanging a pigpen, where the pigs were fed human waste — and they could get a little eager when they were hungry.

Along with her travel guide books, she helped with literature translation for Son So-hui's "The Wind from the South" and Han Mal-sook's "Hymn of the Spirit." She also published books on Korean folktales and children's literature, and in the 1990s, she released children's books inspired by Korean folklore starring a rabbit, which were loved by children worldwide.

She worked as a writer and also an educator, culminating in her directorship at CIEE, where she started working in 2005. There, she helped drive the boom over the last decade in international students coming to study in Korea.



Suzanne Crowder Han, front row second from left, poses with scholar David A. Mason, left, RAS Korea President Steven Shields, Korea Times editor Jon Dunbar and RAS Korea President Emeritus Brother Anthony during an event at the RAS Korea office, June 11, 2022. Korea Times photo by Jon Dunbar

As happens with a lot of long-term foreign residents, Suzanne was a regular at RAS Korea events for decades. After having served as secretary until becoming vice president in 2011, she stepped up in 2023 as acting president when Shields needed to step away due to health reasons.

"For that and many other reasons, I am grateful to Suzanne's quiet but firm and steady leadership and personal friendship," Shields said. "Suzanne brought joy and friendship to us all. I know we all join to send our love and support to her husband and daughter. We will miss her very much."

A funerary service was scheduled for Monday and Tuesday at Seoul St. Mary's Hospital.