

*In Memoriam****Elisabeth Joan Croll, CMG, 1944–2007**

Robert Ash

Elisabeth Croll died of cancer on 3 October 2007, just two weeks after her 63rd birthday. At the time of her death, she was vice-principal of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), where, since 1995, she had also been professor of Chinese anthropology. Her role as one of the leading anthropologists of China in the world spanned some three decades, although in more recent years her professional expertise had widened considerably to embrace many aspects of development and social change in contemporary China. Her death has left many personal and professional gaps. It has deprived SOAS of one of its strongest and most loyal advocates. The field of contemporary Chinese studies in the UK has lost one of its most articulate and forceful protagonists. Saddest of all, Elisabeth's death at far too early an age has removed from their lives someone whom many counted as a dear and close friend.

Lisa, as she was almost universally known (I was one of just two or three colleagues at SOAS who always knew her as Elisabeth) was born in Reefton, a small town situated in the Inangahua River valley between the spectacular Victoria and Paparoa mountain ranges of South Island, New Zealand. It was to Reefton – according to one account, a “dispirited” town – that Lisa's parents (Rev. Colston Robert [Bob] and Kathleen Joan Sprackett) had moved shortly after their marriage in 1943, and it was here that Lisa was born on 21 September the following year. Later, a brother and sister were added to the family.

Lisa's father was a Presbyterian minister of strong convictions, who throughout his life displayed a deep and active commitment to pacifism and social concerns as part of his mission. In the late 1950s, by which time he had left Reefton and was well established in a new ministry in Christchurch, New Zealand, he undertook a three-month visit to Hong Kong, where he worked with an American social service organization. Out of this experience came an involvement in the adoption of some 200 Chinese orphans by families back in New Zealand. In 1961 the failure of church union led to another change in direction, leading to Rev. Sprackett's resignation from his ministry and his removal to Sydney, where he was appointed as Secretary for Resettlement of Refugees and Inter-Church Aid with the Australian Council of Churches. This new role confirmed his humanitarian commitment to the cause of Chinese

* I am indebted to Prof. Jim Croll for his comments on a preliminary draft of this appreciation and for providing me with some of the information relating to Elisabeth's early life.

refugees pouring into Hong Kong as they attempted to escape from terrible famine conditions in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward.

These events and the debate to which they must have given rise within her family cannot have failed to be a shaping influence on Lisa, as she was growing up and became a young woman. In them it is not difficult to find the seeds of the strength of character and moral values – above all, her passionate advocacy of women's rights – that were to become such a feature of Lisa's make-up.

In contrast to her father, whose background was one of considerable poverty and deprivation – his secondary education had been curtailed by the depression and only after being called to the ministry did he undertake an MA degree at Auckland University – Lisa's mother came from a more comfortably-off background of academics. Indeed, her mother's family had been involved in the establishment of New Zealand's first university – the University of Otago – in Dunedin at the end of the 1860s. Thus, it was with an awareness of the virtues of reading and learning, as well as with a sense of social responsibility that Lisa was inculcated from her earliest days.

Lisa's main schooling took place at Cashmere High School in Christchurch, New Zealand. By the time her father had resigned his ministry in December 1962, she had already enrolled as an undergraduate student at the University of Canterbury. As a result, when her family moved to Sydney at the end of that year, Lisa remained behind in New Zealand. At the University of Canterbury, she completed a BA (1965) and MA (1966) – both in history. During her time at Canterbury, Lisa was encouraged by her father's involvement with China to take courses which, for the first time, introduced her to aspects of Asian history and philosophy. In particular, as an undergraduate Lisa fell under the spell of S.A. M. ("Sam") Adshead, a specialist in Chinese History and a world authority on its salt administration. When she moved on to graduate studies at Canterbury, she chose to base her MA dissertation on materials relating to Chinese treaty ports, which Adshead had brought back to New Zealand from his own previous graduate studies at Harvard University. With hindsight, the dissertation marked a significant early milestone, already giving evidence of a shift in interest from purely historical analysis to issues more closely related to social anthropology.

In late 1966 Lisa married James (Jim) G.A. Croll, whom she had met in 1962 at the University of Canterbury, where he was a fellow student pursuing a BE in Civil Engineering. The following year they moved to London, where Jim had been appointed to a research post in civil engineering at University College London (he is now an eminent professor of civil engineering at UCL). The marriage was to produce a son (Nicolas) and a daughter (Katherine). Although Jim and Lisa later divorced, they were to remain close friends until Lisa's death.

Before leaving New Zealand, Lisa had already worked as a house mistress at Rangiruru Girls' School in Christchurch. Following her and Jim's arrival in London, she first found a job at the Ballet Rambert School, teaching English and geography to young female dancers. From the Ballet Rambert she moved on to a research assignment at the Institute of Higher Education – a college of the

University of London located next door to the institution with which her name was to become most closely identified: that of SOAS. It was at the Institute, in the course of her involvement in a research project sponsored by SOAS, that she became acquainted with the local Chinese studies community. Shortly afterwards, Lisa decided to return to formal academic studies by enrolling on a taught postgraduate degree at SOAS – an MA in far eastern studies. There followed more years of study and training, combined with various part-time jobs, until she returned to SOAS to embark on a PhD in the anthropology of China, which was eventually completed in 1977. Although Lisa's writings were to display a constant process of evolution, it was during these years that many of the core issues that she would address so insightfully in so many of her books – above all, those of the place and role of women in Chinese society – were defined and given their first expression.

Hugh Baker has rightly said of Lisa that “she made her own luck”. Indeed, she did and indeed she had to. So closely identified with SOAS had Lisa become by the end of her life that it is easy to lose sight of the fact that she did not receive her first permanent appointment at the School – a lectureship in social anthropology – until as recently as 1990. During the 1970s and 1980s, she survived as an academic through the award of short-term research fellowships at the Contemporary China Institute and in the department of anthropology (both at SOAS), as well as at the Institute of Development Studies (University of Sussex), Queen Elizabeth House and Wolfson College (both at Oxford University), Princeton University in the United States, and the Institute of Social Studies (The Netherlands). To have held down these jobs at a time when she and her husband were bringing up two young children was not the least remarkable of Lisa's achievements. Indeed, the juggling and compromise required of *both* parents in order to accommodate their children's needs were considerable, and Jim Croll recalls times when Lisa's fieldwork in rural Guangdong resulted in him being left at the Chinese YMCA in Kowloon looking after their two children.

In the earlier part of her academic career, Lisa's position was by no means secure. Nor did she herself feel entirely welcome in all the academic communities in which she worked. I well remember having a conversation with Lisa some years ago, in which she unburdened herself of feelings that her struggle for academic recognition had been greater than that of other contemporaries in the field by virtue of having been “a woman and an outsider.”¹ It may be too that her choice of subject for research on China lay somewhat outside the mainstream of conventional anthropology. Wherever the balance of truth lies, it is testament to Lisa's determination to succeed that she ultimately emerged so triumphantly from this struggle.

Following her appointment as lecturer at SOAS in 1990, Lisa received a number of rapid promotions. In 1991 she became senior lecturer; two years later,

1 These are the words used by Delia Davin in her obituary of Lisa in *The Guardian*, 10 October 2007.

a readership in Chinese anthropology was conferred upon her; finally, in 1995 she was appointed to a professorship (also in Chinese Anthropology). She was also the founder chair of the Centre of Chinese Studies at SOAS, which was set up in the 1990s to counter-balance what some viewed as the unnecessarily restrictive contemporary and social science bias of the existing Contemporary China Institute. In this last role, Lisa was characteristically energetic, putting in place a programme of seminars, lectures and occasional workshops and thereby establishing a framework for a cross-disciplinary exchange of views and debate that had previously not existed within the Chinese studies community at the School. Many of the activities she oversaw as Centre chair not only involved academics, but also government and media representatives working outside SOAS.

It was also during these years that Lisa gained a reputation for the forceful advocacy of institutional innovation and enhanced administrative efficiency within SOAS. She was instrumental in the establishment of the department of development studies and for some years she served as department head. Recognition of her organizational and administrative talents culminated in her appointment, in 2002, as vice-principal of SOAS, with special responsibilities for the School's external relations. She clearly relished her role as vice-principal and she was tireless in her efforts to promote the cause of SOAS. Despite suffering years of ill-health and immobility following a fall in China some years ago, the vigour Lisa brought to her non-academic work in SOAS was never in doubt. She cut a familiar figure. As I write this, I can see her clearly, scurrying with the aid of her two sticks – two very elegant sticks, it should be said – as she rushed between meetings in different parts of the School. At her best, she was no less formidable in committee than she was in academic debate. In command of her brief, her interventions were frequently decisive, never less than forceful. Outside committee, her diplomatic skills were impressive. Ever willing to speak for the School at high-profile events, she could be counted on for her professionalism and ability unfailingly to hit the right note, whether to an audience of businessmen, government officials, jaded fellow academics or potential SOAS students.

Lisa's professional activities – as writer and speaker – transcended academic boundaries and extended into the “real” world of government agencies and NGOs, as well as that of journalism and broadcasting. At different times, she was consultant and adviser to many UN agencies, including UNICEF, the UN Development Programme, International Labour Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development. She also worked with the World Bank, Ford Foundation, ODA and the British government's Department for International Development (DFID). Among the NGOs with which she was associated were Oxfam and its Dutch affiliate, Novib.

It is a remarkable list – and to it must also be added the Chinese government itself. Through her work, Lisa gained sufficient credence among Chinese officials for her to be invited to offer policy advice to various branches of government

administration in China. These included the State Council, to which she proffered advice on poverty alleviation; the State Planning Commission (advice on social development); the Ministry of Agriculture (on farm investment, labour and migration); and the Women's Federation (on gender issues). Her methodological contribution to social science training in China was also significant, as evidenced by her leading role in organizing, on behalf of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, an International Conference on Sociology and Research Methods (1993) – the first such meeting to take place in China.

Given her personal and professional commitments – as wife and mother, teacher and administrator, consultant and adviser – one of the most notable features of Lisa's life was her productivity as a writer. Quite apart from lengthy reports written in fulfilment of her work as a consultant, as well as a large number of papers and journal articles, between the completion of her PhD and her death Lisa published around a dozen books. These included *Feminism and Socialism in China* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); *Women in Rural Development: The People's Republic of China* (International Labour Organization, 1979); *The Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); *The Family Rice Bowl: Food and the Domestic Economy in China* (UNRISD and Zed Press, 1983); *Chinese Women since Mao* (M.E. Sharpe, 1984); *China's One-Child Family Policy* (ed., with Delia Davin and Penny Kane: Macmillan, 1985); *From Heaven to Earth: Images and Experiences of Development in China* (Routledge, 1994); *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-Perception in Twentieth-Century China* (Zed Books, 1995); *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia* (Routledge, 2000); and *China's New Consumers: Social Development and Domestic Demand* (Routledge, 2006).

Lisa's credentials as a feminist were not obtrusive in her written work, although it is perhaps no coincidence that her first book (*Feminism and Socialism in China* [1978]) should have chosen a study of the Chinese women's movement as its theme. Her first major academic monograph (*Politics of Marriage* [1981]), based on her PhD research, reflected a close reading of primary documentary materials in Chinese, including a wide range of newspapers and journals (her use of *Zhongguo Qingnian* was a noteworthy feature of this early work). Visiting China in the 1970s was difficult enough; undertaking academic fieldwork presented even more formidable obstacles. Someone as tenacious as Lisa was, however, not to be deterred from the effort, and in 1977 she managed to undertake a brief period of intensive interviewing in Guangdong, which enabled her to supplement her documentary analysis with the findings of her own urban and rural household survey.

Later, Lisa travelled to more remote regions of China – she was indeed one of the first anthropologists to do so. Until relatively late in life, she was prepared to face the discomfort and hardship that inevitably accompanied such visits. She could be amusing, as well as enlightening, in her descriptions of what seemed to me like life-defying experiences. Her accounts of hair-raising journeys in jeeps or

of having to share a heated bed in a peasant household made me grateful that my own visits to China were such cosseted affairs, spent mainly in bookshops, libraries and institutes in the congenial company of fellow academics. But such experiences lent her teaching, as well as her written work, a special immediacy and empathy.

Lisa's deep understanding of the reality of peasant life – above all, that of rural women – predisposed her to endorse the practical logic of China's one-child policy. But she became increasingly uneasy about the less happy consequences of that policy, such as forced abortion and sterilization, not least since they contradicted the aims and values of which she was herself such a staunch advocate. In the 1990s and beyond, Lisa became well known for her active involvement – in the media, as well as through her writing – in publicizing the plight of unwanted daughters and “missing” girls in China and other parts of Asia. Her book on *Endangered Daughters* (2001) was unequivocal in exposing the manifold expressions of discrimination against female children in China and Asia, including withholding health education and care on the basis of gender.

Lisa's final book (*China's New Consumers* [2006]) marked a change in the direction of her work, reflecting her growing interest in the social and economic implications of changes in consumption behaviour in China under the impact of post-1978 reforms. In it she has provided the best account so far available of the nature of China's consumer revolution – the changes in spending patterns, the influence of advertising and branding, the implications for savings behaviour – viewed through the eyes of key social and demographic groups (urban and rural residents; children, young people and the elderly). It offers a masterly narrative and analysis, and truly deserves a wide readership for the insights it offers into one of the key shaping influences of China's future social and economic development trajectories.

Lisa was for many years associated with *The China Quarterly*. She rarely missed a meeting of the executive committee of its editorial board, on which she served for many years. It was wholly characteristic of her determination to minimize the consequences of her final illness that in June 2007 she attended – visibly weakened, but unbowed – the last meeting of the executive committee of the 2006–07 academic year. Her presence was a guarantee of shrewd, sensible and – perhaps, above all – practical interventions. She was a painstaking scrutineer of the titles of articles “in the pipeline,” and many are the authors and readers who benefited from her suggestions for shortening titles or making them more accessible. As SOAS vice-principal, part of Lisa's mission was to ensure that the work of *The China Quarterly* should, as much as possible, directly serve the interests of the School. To this end, she was a great advocate of using the name of *The China Quarterly* to host visiting speakers and of ensuring that, as often as possible, “Special Issue” workshops should be held at SOAS. By tradition, meetings of the executive committee take place over a sandwich lunch. Lisa's infectious chuckle, as she enjoyed the latest morsel of academic gossip, will indeed be greatly missed.

Glittering prizes of many kinds were showered upon Lisa in her final years. They included executive membership of the Royal Society of Asian Affairs, a vice-chairmanship of the Great Britain China Centre, membership of the Learned Societies for the Social Sciences, and, not least, membership of the British government's China Task Force (established at the request of the former Prime Minister Tony Blair). In the 2007 Queen's Birthday Honours, Lisa was awarded a CMG "for services to Higher Education, especially in promoting understanding of China's social development." Tragically, her death occurred just a week before she should have personally received the Honour from HM the Queen. Instead, on 10 October her daughter, Katherine, received it on her behalf.

During her final illness, which was diagnosed as late as spring 2007, Lisa showed extraordinary fortitude. To the amazement and concern of friends and colleagues, she continued to visit SOAS and to attend as many meetings as she could. Her announcement to me of her illness was entirely matter-of-fact and without any hint of self-pity. On the last time I saw her – a sunny summer morning – we sat in her office and chatted about many, mainly inconsequential, things. She gave the impression of being at ease and, at least to outside appearances, she was even recognizably her cheerful self, in spirit as well in appearance. I am glad to have that last memory of her.

She died some three months later in St. John's Hospice, North London.

My friendship with Lisa was a relatively late flowering and many of those who knew her for much longer have spoken and written more eloquently than I can of her "immense generosity of spirit, her wisdom and her wonderful capacity of friendship."² Not the least moving aspect of those tributes is the picture they draw of Lisa in a domestic setting – of her embroidery and needlework skills, her coffee making and home cooking, her love of music, her zest for parties, her visits to her beloved caravan on the Sussex coast (where, however unlikely it may seem, she was apparently reminded of coastal sunsets in New Zealand), her forays to Oxfam for something she could rework into a number suitable for one of her grand occasions. It is one of the sad ironies of life that only after someone has died does one learn and discover – let alone appreciate – the full extent and richness of the person's character and gifts.

2 Harriet Evans in her obituary of Lisa on behalf of the British Association of Chinese Studies (BACS), 8 October 2007.