

## Elisabeth Croll and Public Anthropology in China

Hok Bun KU

It is my great honor to be here to give a speech for celebration of the life and work of my most respected PhD supervisor Professor Elisabeth Croll. I have been shocked and very saddened by the news of Lisa's death in October 2007. At the time, I was the Fulbright visiting scholar in the Washington University in St. Louis in the United States. I could not accept it was the true news and tried to verify through the internet. But the truth was that Lisa really left us. Many scenes of my life in London came back to my mind and Lisa's smile and image rose before me again. I studied my PhD from 1994 to 1998 in the department of anthropology and sociology at SOAS under the supervision of Lisa. I had many choices to study my PhD at the time because I got full scholarship from the Sir Edward Youde Memorial Foundation in Hong Kong. But finally I decided to come to SOAS because of Lisa, the world well-known scholar on subjects such as development, poverty alleviation and the rights of women and children in China. After I came to SOAS, I knew I made the right decision. I have to say I enjoyed my life in London very much because Lisa gave me a lot of freedom to pursue my own research and encouraged me to develop indigenous Chinese concepts in understanding Chinese peasant resistance in the post-reform China. As I stated in my book *Moral Politics in a South Chinese Village*, I am very grateful to Lisa for her warm encouragement at every stage of my research project.

Lisa set a great role model for her students and young scholars that we academics should walk out from the ivory tower and rethink the position/mission of social scientists and the ways of sociological/anthropological intervention. I remember one time I asked Lisa how she positioned herself as an anthropologist; she told me that she did not want to be hidebound by narrow disciplinary constraints. To her, the most important concern is the practical implications of our research. For many Chinese scholars, Lisa is unforgettable not only because of her academic achievement in advancing field studies in China, but of her enthusiasm in participating in social change and development. Lisa went beyond the academic world and she was deeply involved in consultancy work for UN agencies, the International Labour Organisation, the World Bank, the Ford Foundation, Oxfam and the Department for International Development. She had many collaborative relationships in China, like Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Ministry of Civil Affairs, where her work was admired by academics and officials. She advised the Chinese Women's Federation on gender issues, and worked with government ministries on poverty reduction, agricultural labour and rural to urban migration. Her work on discrimination against daughters and demographic sex imbalances in China and Asia gained international notice. In 1998, she was appointed as chair to the UN council in Tokyo. Following the footprints of Lisa, most of her students in mainland China and Hong Kong also actively engage in social movement and public affairs. For example, my classmate and now my colleague Dr. Pun Ngai is the founder of The Chinese Working Women Networks in Shenzhen, aiming at promoting betterment for the lives of Chinese migrant women workers and developing feminist awareness of workers' empowerment. Her book *Making in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* was honored as the winner of the C. Wright Mills Award in 2006 in the US.

She became the first Asian winner of this prestigious award since its establishment in 1964.

Here I would also like to highlight the importance of Lisa's work to the Chinese academic in specific and the Chinese community in general. As you know, anthropology or other social sciences programs were offered in the most prestigious universities in China in the 1920s. At the time, the 'applied sociology' approach was used in teaching and learning, emphasizing the importance of social inquiry and field research and the applied nature of knowledge. The sociology/anthropology for change and liberation is part of a long tradition of sociology/anthropology that aimed at both studying and rebuilding society. However, regarded as the capitalist academic discipline by the socialist government, all the sociology, social work and anthropology courses were eliminated from the universities during the "restructuring of institutions of higher education" in 1952 in newly established People's Republic of China (PRC). China adopted the Soviet Model of socialism and created a centralized planned economy, in which the government provided its people with a comprehensive welfare package from cradle to grave. Then social sciences including anthropology as a profession was seen as unnecessary and was eliminated from all universities. In 1979, sociology/anthropology as a discipline was restored to the university curriculum soon after the introduction of the Open Door Economic Policy in the PRC.

However, the problem is that after twenty years' discontinuity of development, when sociology and anthropology were restored to the university curriculum, China's social sciences have had a clear break from the work of early anthropologist/sociologists and from the central methodological commitments that anthropologist/sociologists should understand particular phenomena only by seeing

the social world from the point of view of the actor. In China, there has been a trend in the direction of sociology/anthropology to increasingly accenting instrumental positivism and the use of ‘scientific methodology.’ The idea of ‘scientific methodology’ has become mostly equated with the application of statistical techniques to governmental census data or other survey data. Most of Chinese social scientists still believe that researchers can be ‘value free’ and separate themselves from the method used and the object they studied. However, survey data can only provides superficial evidence on the social world. In China, the strong link between academia and community gradually weakened as academics increasingly assumed a pose of scientific objectivity and focused on the creation of new knowledge within academia, thus detaching themselves from direct involvement in reform and activism.

However, Lisa’s work was different from this mainstream sociology and anthropology in mainland China. Her works hit the great transformation of Chinese society since the end of 1970s. As Chinese students of Lisa, we are not only proud to say that Lisa is a great Sinologist whose pioneering work on women movement and socialist revolution opens up a paradigm shift on China’s studies looking into the everyday life struggle of women in Chinese villages, but we are deeply touched by her social concern for the betterment of Chinese women lives reflecting from her first book, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, written in 1978, up to her last book, *China’s New Consumers: Social Development and Domestic Demand*, published in 2006. Her lasting commitment on research into the women’s lives in rural China over three decades has tremendous impact on Chinese academic circle, and as one of Lisa students, we are born to carry on her intellectual spirit which shed light on a community due long to care about ordinary lives.

Lisa's unfailing concern on the improvement of Chinese women lives inspires the Chinese academic community which now begins to talk about the role of public intellectuals in defining and redefining the path of social development in China. Lisa's spirit is a challenge to the existing hegemony of China's development and poses earnest calling for us to rethinking the role of Chinese intellectuals and the path of social development for China's future. Today increasingly more Chinese social scientists have been discontented with the gap between social practice and social research during the last few decades because the needs of the local community have not been understood by social scientists, and because the knowledge generated by social research has not informed social policy/practice and not has really been able to tackle the problems of local communities. Hence, there is an increasing concern about exploring alternative ways of conducting social research and ways of promoting partnerships between practitioners and social researchers to generate practical knowledge that is useful for social change and development.

Lisa's life and works demonstrate how an academic engaged into public sphere. She advocated a broader interpretation of scholarship and advises an application of knowledge that moves towards social engagement. She believed that education institute faculty and students, in collaboration with community residents, should apply their knowledge to the solution of social issues and problems. I remembered she told me that she didn't intend to publish her books in academic press, but commercial publishers like Zed and Routledge because she wanted her works could be read by more readers and hoped through her books, the western audiences could know more about China in a non- bias way. When I asked why she had so much energy to engage in the works of different NGOs, world organizations and international agencies. She clearly told me it was the responsibility of an academic. The essence of public

anthropology is to bring anthropology into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in conversation. This is a process involving a double conversation engaging publics beyond the academy in dialogue about matters of political and moral concern. To Lisa, public anthropologists should work in close connection with the grassroots and public and work with social movements like labour organizations, neighbourhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations and so on.

I have to say the academia-community partnership model of education is not easy to achieve, but if it is effectively implemented, it will have positive impact on the social development and our professional education. There is an old Chinese saying that ‘a journey of 1000 miles begins with one step’ (千里之行，始於足下). Though the path of social development in China has not been smooth and it still has a long way to go, our older generation started by taking the first step. Today it is our responsibility to follow the footprint of our older generation and act as the agent for social development. Thank you!

Volume 54 Issue 1. Elisabeth Croll: English | Français. Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies. Article. Article. Elisabeth Croll: Wise daughters from foreign lands: European women writers in China, xii, 265 pp. London, etc.: Pandora Press, 1989. £14.95. Overall, Croll was optimistic about the socialist feminist movement in China. Croll felt particularly thrilled when, during the anti-Confucian and anti-Lin Biao campaigns, both urban and rural women had the opportunities to reflect on the Confucian ideology that had oppressed women for so long. During these campaigns, women's issues were formally discussed, and these discussions were placed in the center of people's everyday lives. In Lisa Rofel's anthropological work, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* published in 2007, she explained that young urban Chinese women became more concerned about their personal successes, their ability to consume material goods, and their consumerist lifestyles than with enacting political change. Elisabeth J Croll While the use of domestic service has long been in practice in China, especially among senior level cadres and intellectuals in cities like Beijing, the recent spread of this form of service and its institutionalization reflects both the State's desire to reduce the burden of household work of women and the changes in civil society, especially in familial responsibilities. and individual aspirations. Read more about Domestic Service in China. Search form. Search. Elisabeth Joan Sprackett, anthropologist, Chinese scholar and development consultant: born Reefton, New Zealand 21 September 1944; Lecturer in Anthropology, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University 1990-91, Senior Lecturer 1991-93, Reader 1993-95, Professor of Chinese Anthropology 1995-2007, Vice-Principal, with special responsibility for External Relations. Professor Elisabeth Croll. Anthropologist and advocate of women's rights in China. Wednesday 17 October 2007 00:00. Lisa Croll was an impressive strategic thinker, chair of committees and public speaker, and she had an abiding interest in the policy implications of her research. She used these skills and interests to great effect, in her work as a consultant and policy adviser. The applicants for Elisabeth Croll Scholarship For Fieldwork In China, 2020 will be informed should a reference from their supervisors. The candidates should forward the reference form to their supervisors. The successful applicants will be informed about the result of the application by mid-July through e-mail. SOAS, University of London, (The School of Oriental and African Studies) is a public research university in London, England, and a constituent college of the University of London. Founded in 1916, SOAS has produced several heads of states, government ministers, diplomats, Supreme Court judges, a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and many other notable leaders around the world. Related Links of School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) University of London.