I am sad but honoured to be here in SOAS today to pay tribute to Professor Elisabeth Croll – ‘Lisa’ as she was known to her friends - who achieved great distinction both as an academic and as an international consultant on subjects such as development, poverty alleviation and the rights of women and children.

Other speakers will focus on her later achievements. I will talk about Lisa as a pioneer in the study of women and gender in China.

Lisa was born in Reefton, a remote former gold-mining town in South Island, New Zealand, where her father was a Presbyterian minister. On her mother's side, her family were academics; they had been involved in founding the University of Otago, the country's first, at Dunedin. Lisa herself attended school in Christchurch and gained as MA in history at the University of Canterbury in 1967.

In London at the beginning of the 1970s Lisa began to establish herself in the field that would become her life’s work, undertaking an MA in Far Eastern studies at SOAS followed by a PhD in the anthropology of China.

With so much world interest in China now, so much movement between China and the west and comparatively free access to China, it is perhaps not easy to appreciate what an act of courage and imagination it was for Lisa to
involve herself in Chinese studies and how difficult it was for her and other scholars to gain the materials and access that they needed.

Very little had been written on Chinese women in English prior to the 1970s. In her own first book Lisa listed three titles on Chinese women that had preceded it, none of them academic studies, and a few more that had been in preparation at the same time. In the Chinese language, although there was documentary material available, it was an era when no academic studies of this sort were being undertaken.

China and the west were still rather isolated from each other. The UK had recognised the People’s Republic at ambassadorial level only in March 1972, following the Nixon visit and China’s recovery of its seat in the United Nations in 1971. Recognition from New Zealand, Lisa’s home country (and mine too by the way), came even later in late December 1972 - the newly-elected Labour government was committed to recognition of Beijing, but had been quite dilatory about it. Amusingly, it was rivalry with Australia that speeded things up. Wellington suddenly realised that Australia might beat New Zealand to it and in the event the two countries recognised simultaneously.

The more general diplomatic recognition of China was followed only slowly by improvements in academic exchange and access between the West and China. It first became possible for western students to study in China in the mid-1970s when Lisa’s student days were already over. Like others of her generation, she felt she had missed out although she was able to make brief trips to China in 1973, 1977, and 1980 and of course many times in later years. She also regretted that when other scholars were first allowed to make
longer fieldwork trips to China she could because she was unwilling to leave her young children for protracted periods.

These problems of access never held Lisa back in what was to be a long and successful writing and publishing career. Her first book, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (1978), was a pioneering study of the Chinese women's movement from its emergence in the late 19th century. Lisa’s was the first account to track the uneasy but important relationships between Chinese feminism, nationalism and Marxism. She showed that Chinese feminism had emerged with modern nationalism, that it predated Marxism in China, and that it has a history of its own, intertwined with that of the nationalist and communist revolutions in China, which is important to our understanding of China’s 20th century social revolution. This study rescued from obscurity the Chinese women’s suffrage movement that began in the second decade of the 20th century. It also shed light on feminism in the May Fourth Movement, on the ambivalence of Guomindang policy towards women and on important female historical figures such as Qiu Jin and Xiang Jingyu. It focussed on fundamental issues with which Lisa was to be concerned for the rest of both her academic and personal life, the relationship between women’s roles in the family and work, reproductive and productive labour, women’s access to and control of economic and political recourses, the importance of female solidarity groups, and the possibilities of changing the status and roles of women.

Lisa’s second major book, *Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China* (1981) was based on the research she had carried out for her PhD. It brought anthropological approaches to the study of political reform, showing that the
cultural specifics of marriage in China were correlated with the structure and function of households. Marriage involved bringing a new member into the husband’s family and creating new connections and perhaps alliances between the families involved. This was too important a matter to be left simply to the young protagonists. Lisa showed that a range of parental involvement in the marriages of their children continued despite the government's attempts to establish marriage forms based on free choice and sexual equality. Arranged marriage - the dominant form of marriage throughout Republican China - lived on, at least in the rural areas of the People’s Republic, where parents often still initiated a match; in the urban areas parents might have given up absolute control but still retained the power of veto over their children’s choices. Lisa argued that because the economic policy of the communist government had retained the peasant household as the basic economic unit of society it had actually encouraged the persistence of old marriage customs and worked against the new ideology of marriage. Marriage reforms, she insisted, were hard to implement and would produce conflict between older people and the state. Over a quarter of a century later, when so much of the Maoist collectivist order has been swept away, and the young people of whom Lisa wrote are themselves attempting to influence the marriage choices of their children, Lisa's insight into the resilience of the traditional social structures of rural China can be truly appreciated.

Lisa was quick to see that the post Mao economic reforms would inevitably have important impacts for women. *Her Domestic Rice Bowl: Food and the Domestic Economy in China* (1983) reflected her interest in women’s roles within the rural household where they were responsible not only for
processing and cooking food, but also, increasingly as the collective economy disappeared, for producing it and for finding new methods of income generation in the ‘courtyard economy’. In the same year she produced *Chinese Women since Mao* (1983), a popular overview of the impact of the reforms on both rural and urban women. This provided one of the first detailed considerations of the implications of the new household responsibility system for the place of rural women. Lisa correctly foresaw that decollectivisation would reveal a rural labour surplus, and that where non-agricultural work was available, rural men would be likely to take it up, leaving the less remunerative agricultural work to women. In other chapters she updated her work on marriage and marriage law and offered one of the first accounts of the one-child family policy which had been introduced only three years earlier.

The reform leadership in China saw the disappointing progress of China’s per capita grain production as an important brake on China’s economic growth. It blamed both the lack of incentive in collective agriculture, and the rapid growth of the population since 1949. It therefore dismantled collective agriculture and simultaneously introduced the one child policy, an unprecedented attempt by the state to intervene in one of the most private areas of life, made, ironically, at a time when the state was withdrawing from direct control in so many areas of life in China. Lisa immediately understood the importance of the new policy and saw that it would conflict with the new economic system in the countryside under which households, now responsible for farming their own land, would wish to maximise their future labour force through the reproduction. The prevalence of patrilocal marriage would certainly mean that couples whose first child was female
would try by every means to have a son. Otherwise, when their daughter married out, they would have no younger generation to offer them economic support and care, or to carry on the family line. Thus began Lisa’s concern with sex ratios at birth, sex selective abortions and the problem of ‘missing girls’ in Asian populations which she was to carry forward into future work.

Lisa’s good relations with the All-China Women’s Federation enabled her to make a research trip to China to study the implementation of the one child policy. She came back with bundles of posters showing radiant young couples with their only daughter in their arms proclaiming that girls were just as good as boys. Lisa was, however, very much aware that as long as patrilocal marriage persisted, a girl could not be as good as a boy for a Chinese peasant family. She raised funding for a conference on the new policy which was held at Queen Elizabeth House in Oxford and attended by demographers, sociologists, and family planning experts from the UK and the US. Out of the conference came yet another book, *China’s One Child Family Policy*, edited by Lisa, me and Penny Kane, then of the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

Although ultimately Lisa achieved the success she deserved, she felt that as a woman and an outsider she had had to struggle for recognition in the early years of her career. Incredibly, despite a distinguished record of successful research grant applications and of disciplinary and interdisciplinary publications, Lisa was not offered a tenured position until 1990 when she obtained a lectureship at SOAS. Thereafter, of course, her progress was meteoric. Other people will speak of this, of her work in the later years and of her growing recognition from UN and other international bodies.
Lisa will be remembered for her books - and her countless papers and articles – which reflect her strong focus on women, children and the domestic economy, but also the variety of her interests, her quick appreciation of the importance of developments in China in the 1980s and 90s, her readiness to extend her gaze to Asia as a whole, and her refusal to be hidebound by narrow disciplinary constraints. She was remarkable for her intellectual energy and for extraordinary productivity. It is significant that in an overview of writing on Chinese women in the last 50 years published last year - Gail Hershatter’s *Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century* - Lisa’s publications, and in particular her first two books, receive many, many mentions. Despite the passage of time and the publication, in some cases, of more detailed studies for which Lisa’s writing had set the agenda, her books are still recognised as path breaking and some remain standard texts for courses on Chinese society.

Lisa’s high standards extended to the domestic sphere; collaboration with her allowed me to glimpse her impressive stamina, she worked late and rose early but one was always sustained by her excellent coffee, her home baking and by her interest in, and humorous comments on, the doings of friends and family, colleagues and enemies.