



*Lo Hui-min (right) with son Bobo
(1925?–2006)*

Lo Hui-min
(1925?–2006)¹



Lo Hui-min, a distinguished historian of modern China who was elected a Fellow of The Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1981, died on 28 April 2006 of complications resulting from Alzheimer's disease.

The official record states that he was born on 4 May 1925 in Shanghai, China. However, according to his wife Helen, his elder sister reports very clear memories that his birth was actually two years earlier, although she agrees that it was in Shanghai. Coming from a family of ten brothers and sisters, he spent most of his first years in a village near Quanzhou, Fujian Province, receiving his first education from a teacher especially hired by the extended family to teach its younger members. After his mother died (early 1930s), his elder brother took him to Malaya and sent him to Singapore to be educated at a Seventh Day Adventist school there. During China's War Against Japan (1937–45), he went secretly back to China through Hanoi, hoping to help in China's war effort, and ended up in Chiang Kai-shek's wartime capital Chongqing in southwest China. He got the chance to go to Yenching University, and it was there he acquired his lifelong and intense love of history in general and China's modern history in particular.

After graduating he worked for a time as a journalist in Manchuria (northeast China) in the years leading up to the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949. Under the command of their famous military leader and strategist Lin Biao (1907–71), the CCP won their earliest major victories in Manchuria, capturing the whole region by the end of 1948. Lo Hui-min was strongly supportive of Lin Biao, and Helen still has photographs of the two together. Lo remained left wing in his political views all his life, but did not join the CCP nor wish to live in the People's Republic.

¹ I gratefully acknowledge much of the information on Lo Hui-min's life, especially his early life, to a telephone conversation with his widow Helen on 28 August 2007.

He went back to Singapore, but because he organised a workers' strike on the ship, he was arrested on arrival. His elder brother bailed him out, but insisted on his leaving Singapore immediately and paid for him to go to London and undertake further university work in Britain. He did his PhD at the University of Cambridge on Sino-European diplomatic history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His supervisor there was the distinguished Sinologist Victor Purcell and he obtained the degree in 1953.

Failing to obtain residency in Britain, he taught for a year in Germany, and then decided to take up an offer of appointment at the ANU, which he did in 1963. The then head of the Department of Far Eastern History was the highly distinguished Professor C P FitzGerald (1902–92), Lo Hui-min's chief mentor at this stage of his life, and among several very good friends in Canberra made through his period in Cambridge. Lo Hui-min lived virtually the whole of the rest of his life in Canberra.

Lo Hui-min's main contribution to knowledge was his research on George Ernest Morrison (1862–1920). An Australian who lived, worked and travelled widely in China almost all the second half of his life, Morrison was from 1897 to 1912 the China correspondent for *The Times*. His name was adopted for the Australian National University's – and Australia's – most prestigious series of China-focused lectures: the George Ernest Morrison Lectures in Ethnology. Morrison left hundreds of boxes and bundles of correspondence, diaries and memoranda, which were housed in Sydney's Mitchell Library. C P FitzGerald knew of these 'Morrison Papers' and it was he who suggested that Lo Hui-min work on them.

In 1976, Cambridge University Press published two large volumes of *The Correspondence of G E Morrison*, edited by Lo Hui-min, with extensive comments on the correspondence by Lo. The Australian Academy of the Humanities is acknowledged as making a generous grant towards publication. What was remarkable about these letters was the fact that Morrison was closely involved in China's history and corresponded with so many others also involved. In other words, Lo's contribution was to modern Chinese history, as well as to the study of Morrison. But, as Lo himself points out, the foreign British view was only one of many points of view. Morrison knew an enormous amount about China, he believed himself – indeed was – sympathetic to China. But the correspondence is essentially Morrison's views and those of his correspondents: western figures take a more central role and the Chinese generally a much more peripheral one than would be the case in a Chinese source.

Lo Hui-min intended to follow up this study with further books based on the Morrison Papers, especially the diaries. He made a considerable amount of progress in this project, especially work on the diaries, but for various reasons never completed it. This was a matter of intense disappointment to Lo Hui-min and a great loss to the study of modern China and of Morrison, indeed to the humanities in general.

Another field of Lo Hui-min's main contribution was the role of archives and confidential papers in modern China's international relations, especially relations with Britain. His main publication in this field was *Foreign Office Confidential Papers Relating to China* (The Hague, Mouton, 1969). He also contributed a chapter on archives to a book I helped edit (jointly with Donald Leslie and Wang Gungwu), *Essays on the Sources for Chinese History* (Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1973), written in honour of C P FitzGerald shortly after his retirement from the Department of Far Eastern History in 1968. I recall that Lo sent his chapter in late, even though he was one of those admirers of C P FitzGerald who had initiated the project in the first place. When the chapter came, however, it was just brilliant and worth waiting for. Apart from being detailed and interesting, it showed a real sensitivity to all the problems of historical sources and how to use them. Of course, any decent historian must be aware of such issues, but the way he expressed himself and his immediate experiences with archival Chinese and non-Chinese material showed a sense of history and scholarly mind that I found unusual and admirable at the time. On re-reading the chapter to write this obituary I reacted in precisely the same way.

A third research interest, which Lo Hui-min took up fairly late in his career, was the life and works of the writer and political philosopher Gu Hongming (1857–1928),² who spent much of his life in the West and, when in China, was much sought after by distinguished western visitors, a prominent example being W Somerset Maugham. Lo Hui-min nearly completed a book on Gu Hongming. In the meantime, he had several articles on Gu in the journal *Papers on Far Eastern History* and its successor *East Asian History*, published at the ANU.

With these research interests and contributions, it comes as no surprise that Lo Hui-min was very interested in western views of China. It was on this subject that he gave his own Morrison Lecture in 1976, entitled 'The Tradition and Prototypes of the China-Watcher'. In this lecture, he analyses the weaknesses and biases of what western China-watchers have written about China, mainly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is also some defence of old China-watchers, but the tone is definitely less defensive than what we find in *The Correspondence*, Morrison being among the best of these China-watchers. Having worked a bit on western images of China, I am very happy to acknowledge the influence Lo Hui-min's thoughtful approach to the issue exerted on me, especially his critical yet appreciative turn of mind.

Long-time colleague of Lo Hui-min Dr David Kelly told me he regarded Lo as a highly principled man. Dr Kelly had on several occasions seen Lo Hui-min take up positions on principle, even if these were unpopular and irritated authorities.

² In this obituary I use the pinyin romanisation system, but in his articles Lo Hui-min spelt this author Ku Hung-ming, according to the Wade-Giles romanisation system.

Lo Hui-min was quite nationalist about China, even apart from his general left-wing sympathy for the People's Republic. He was, for example, strongly supportive of China's territorial claims, especially its claim to sovereignty over Taiwan. I remember discussing this matter with him and his defending China's stand excitedly and passionately.

His enthusiasm for his native country is also obvious in the fact that he wrote a history of China especially for his son Bobo. Born from a marriage to a French woman, Monique, Bobo grew up mainly in Australia at a time when China had a very bad image here. Hui-min wanted his son to retain interest in China and wrote a children's book especially for him. Called *The Story of China* (Angus & Robertson, 1970) and decorated with beautiful illustrations, this book was 'highly commended' in The Children's Book of the Year Awards for 1971.

For this obituary I wrote to Professor Wang Gungwu, now of the National University of Singapore's East Asia Institute, but for some eighteen years head of the ANU's Department of Far Eastern History and thus closely associated with Lo. He summarised Lo Hui-min's career in the following terms:

Lo Hui-min was a man of artistic temperament with many creative instincts. He chose, however, to devote himself to historical research. For his work on modern Chinese history, he demanded the highest standards of accuracy. He worried over every fact and detail, always determined to provide his reader with the most complete information possible. Thus I know that everything he has written can be relied upon and only regret that he did not write more. His herculean efforts to edit the Morrison Diaries earned him considerable respect.

I share Professor Wang's perceptive evaluation. I would add only that Lo Hui-min was a brilliant man, highly emotional and passionately committed to life, to scholarship, to his topic, and to values of social justice. There was also a certain lack of discipline about him, but for which he might have accomplished even more than he did. He was often excitable and could be quite caustic about others to their face: I heard him really tear strips off one speaker he did not respect. But for the most part, he was genial and likeable, a loyal friend and honest to the core. He will be greatly missed by his family and many friends.

Lo Hui-min is survived by his widow Helen, three sons, Bobo, Hsiao-niu and Hsiao-ti, and one daughter Hsiao-pin; all but Bobo being Helen's.

Colin Mackerras