

## 26 August 2023 - Isabel Crook, 107, Dies; Her Life in China Spanned a Century of Change

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/25/world/asia/isabel-crook-dead.html>

By Clay Risen

A noted educator and anthropologist, she spent almost her entire life in China, where she was a committed friend of the Communist government.



Isabel Crook in 1940, when she was Isabel Brown. Her life in China spanned the Japanese invasion and World War II, as well as the subsequent Communist revolution. Credit... via Crook family

Isabel Crook, a China-born daughter of Canadian missionaries who became one of her adopted country's most celebrated foreign residents, beloved as an educator, anthropologist and articulate advocate for the Communist state, died on Sunday in Beijing. She was 107.

Her son Carl Crook said the cause of death, in a hospital, was pneumonia.

Mrs. Crook was among the last of a generation of Westerners born to missionaries in China in the decades before the Japanese invasion, World War II and the subsequent Communist revolution.

The experience defined them. Some, like [Henry Luce](#), the publisher of Time and Life, became ardent anti-Communists. But others, including Mrs. Crook, perceived the Communists as saviors who were lifting the country out of colonial squalor. (Still others, like the American diplomat [John Paton Davies](#), made famous as a target of McCarthy-era attacks, fell somewhere in between.)

As an anthropologist, Mrs. Crook saw herself as an observer of social change; as a Communist, she saw herself as an agent of it.

After returning to China from college in Toronto in 1939, she conducted field work among the

impoverished, isolated villages of western Sichuan Province, traveling through ravines and mountain passes by foot, mule-cart and even zip line.



Mrs. Crook with her husband, David, in about 1947, when they taught English in villages and towns controlled by the Communist Party during China's civil war. Credit...via Crook family  
She met her future husband, David Crook, in China. A dedicated British Communist, he had fought against the fascists during the Spanish Civil War while also working as a spy for the Soviet NKVD, a precursor to the KGB. When the fighting ended, the NKVD sent him to perform similar work in China.

After World War II began, the couple moved to Britain, where David joined the Royal Air Force. Isabel worked in a munitions factory and joined the Communist Party. They married in 1942. The Crooks returned to China in 1947 to teach English in the villages and towns controlled by the Chinese Communist Party during the country's civil war. They were among the few Westerners to accompany the columns of Communists during their victorious entry into Beijing in 1949, marking the founding of the new state.

The Crooks became true believers in Chinese communism. They were on the founding faculty of what became the Beijing Foreign Studies University, where they helped train several generations of Chinese diplomats.

They wrote two books together based on their years spent among Chinese villagers: "Revolution in a Chinese Village: Ten Mile Inn" (1959) and "The First Years of Yangyi Commune" (1966).



Isabel Crook in 1963 outside the tomb of the revolutionary statesman Sun Yat-sen in Nanjing, China. Credit...via Crook family

Both books have become classics in the field of Chinese ethnography, thanks to their analysis of how world-historical changes like the Communist revolution affected everyday rural life. Unlike other Westerners, the Crooks chose to live on campus, alongside their students and fellow faculty members. They wore simple sackcloth outfits, like their neighbors. No one called Mrs. Crook “professor”; she was always “Comrade Isabel.”

Their faith remained unshaken even after David was charged with espionage and imprisoned between 1967 and 1973, at the height of the Cultural Revolution. Mrs. Crook insisted he was innocent, but her defense backfired, and she was kept under house arrest for several years. The two were released in 1973 and rehabilitated by Premier Zhou Enlai. They later said they forgave the Chinese government for its excesses.

Mrs. Crook’s most recent book, and her most significant, published in 2013, is [“Prosperity’s Predicament: Identity, Reform, and Resistance in Rural Wartime China \(1940-1941\),”](#) which is based on her prewar field notes and was written with Christina Gilmartin and Yu Xiji.

One of its editors, Gail Hershatter, a history professor at the University of California-Santa Cruz, said the book offers a unique look at a rural society that even in China, with its rapid urbanization, seems to many like a foreign country.



Mrs. Crook with President Xi Jinping in 2019, when he awarded her the Friendship Medal of China, the country’s highest honor bestowed on a foreigner. Credit...Greg Baker/POOL, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“She maintained a lifelong interest in what’s happening outside the major cities, beyond the view of historians and the people that keep the written record,” Dr. Hershatter said in a phone interview. “She had a good instinct for what’s interesting, and what about daily life is really worth writing down.”

Isabel Joy Brown was born on Dec. 15, 1915, in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan. Her parents, [Homer and Muriel \(Hockey\) Brown](#), were Methodist missionaries from Canada who worked in the country’s schools and universities.

She graduated from the University of Toronto with a degree in anthropology in 1939. While living in wartime Britain she pursued a doctorate in the same subject at the London School of Economics but did not complete it.

In addition to her son Carl, she is survived by two other sons, Michael and Paul; her sister, Julia Baker; six grandchildren; and nine great-grandchildren. [David Crook died](#) in 2000 at 90.

Though Mrs. Crook remained committed to the vision of the Chinese Revolution, she did not shrink from criticizing the government, especially after she retired from teaching in 1981.

She and her husband were enthralled by the protests around Tiananmen Square in 1989, and appalled by the government’s [subsequent crackdown](#), killing hundreds, if not thousands, of people.

But her occasional criticism did not keep the Chinese government, and the Chinese people, from bestowing her with accolades. In 2019, President Xi Jinping awarded her the Friendship Medal of China, the country’s highest honor available to a foreigner.