

OBITUARY

Kristina Lindell
(1928–2005)
In Memoriam



KRISTINA LINDELL, renowned scholar of Asian folklore, linguistics, and culture, internationally well known for her long-term research on and engagement for the culture of the Kammu (Khmu) people of northern Southeast Asia, passed away on 8 February 2005 in Lund, Sweden. The cause was cancer, which she had previously battled and proudly survived. She is survived by her brother Ebbe Lindell, retired professor of psychology and pedagogy.

Kristina Lindell, whose full name was Ulla Märta Kristina Lindell, was born in Lund in 1928. Lund University was for many years the home base for her wide-ranging research on Asia, which earned her the prestigious Rausing Prize in 1988, as well as a Lund University honorary doctorate in 1994. She made decisive and long-term contributions to the establishment and development of Asian Studies there from the 1970s onwards. After creating a separate department for East Asian Languages, in her capacity as head of the department Kristina introduced not only the teaching of Chinese, but also Japanese, Thai, and Indonesian. She was made Commander of His Majesty's Order of the White Elephant for her efforts in promoting the teaching of Thai at Lund. As part of the development of the curriculum, courses in East and Southeast Asian Studies were also introduced, and she drew on the interdisciplinary potential of Lund University and engaged specialists in a number of disciplines as teachers. In 1984, this network formed the basis for the university's decision to start the Programme for East and Southeast Asian Studies, with Kristina Lindell as founding Chair of its board. Besides drawing together researchers and educators from all over the university, this Programme also played an essential role for initiating study and research exchange activities between Lund University and several universities in East and Southeast Asia, not least by securing the first formal exchange agreements with educational institutions in the region. After a decade, it was succeeded by the present Center for East and Southeast Asian Studies at Lund University.

Kristina Lindell was indeed a superb teacher, not least in languages, and an outstanding academic leader and administrator; she was an accomplished Sinologist, linguist, and Asian folklorist with broad interest and knowledge

in many adjacent fields. She was also a warm, colorful and distinctive person whose house was always open to visitors. She produced wonderful children's books, and was an inspiration in scholarly perseverance, curiosity, and dedication for her many students in a host of different fields.

Kristina's own first job, at ten years of age, is said to have been as German-Swedish interpreter at a railroad show (MÅRTENSSON 2003). Her father had worked on the railroad ferries from Sweden to Germany; during the family visits she picked up German. She later completed high school by correspondence in 1958, and then attended a teacher's seminar. She had wanted to teach Swedish in Sameland, Sweden's far north, but due to lack of funds, she instead worked as a primary school teacher in the archipelago off Sweden's east coast. Significantly, during her stay, she trained for and obtained a sailing certificate, as if to prove that no sphere hitherto dominated by men was off limits to her. She switched to teaching in the Southern city of Malmö for the next twelve years, and continued to study languages in nearby Lund, including English. She became interested in Chinese and started to attend the occasional Chinese classes taught at Lund University by Olov Bertil Andersson, who had himself been a pupil of Bernhard Karlgren, the renowned Swedish Sinologist and director of Stockholm's Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities. Kristina Lindell was soon able to serve as a translator at the Embassy of Sweden in Peking, meeting such dignitaries as the then premier Zhou Enlai, among others, while working there for a year in the early 1960s in a nominal post (rumor has it that the gentlemen of the foreign ministry simply would not have a woman in the higher ranked and probably more suitable post of cultural attaché). She continued her studies at the University of Copenhagen with Professor Søren Egerod, another former Karlgren student who was interested in Southern China's mosaic of dialects and cultures. She then served from 1974 as lecturer in Chinese at Lund University. Thus began her long career and the steady building of an Asian languages department at that university.

It is clear that as a woman scholar, Kristina at times met with disrespect arising from sexist bigotry in Sweden. Ever formal in her role as a teacher, she did not say much about this, but one sometimes can find subtle allusions to it in her writings: In a review of a volume entitled *ASEAN Folk Literature* (in this journal, volume 58, [1999], pages 237–39) she speculated that contempt for women might be the hidden reason why the prince in many folktales is upright and honest but the princess unreliable and false!

In Copenhagen she also studied Thai, and it was while working in Thailand to make linguistic recordings in 1972 that she encountered the Kammu people and their language, which belongs in the Mon-Khmer family and is spoken in Laos, Thailand, and other parts of northern Southeast Asia. The work was initiated at the Lampang field station of the Copenhagen-based Scandinavian

Institute of Asian Studies in northern Thailand, which was then led by the Danish archaeologist Per Sørensen.

By an extraordinarily happy coincidence Kristina met with Damrong Tayanin, i.e. Kam Raw, an extremely knowledgeable, multilingual scholar of Kammu origin well versed in the culture of the region as well as that of Kammu. Their collaboration on Kammu folklore and language continued from the 1970s and until her death. It focused on both Thailand and Laos, and was based at Lund University, from which Damrong Tayanin has also received an honorary doctorate. Financial support was obtained from such sources as the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation.

Many other scholars of different fields joined in what became the multidisciplinary research project on the culture of the Kammu people, which was led for many years by Kristina Lindell. They included, notably, the folklorist Jan-Öjvind Swahn, the linguist Jan-Olof Svantesson, and the musicologist Håkan Lundström, as well as many others including Kristina's mother, Ester Lindell, who lived with her for many years, and who joined in indexing folktale motifs and other work.

One of the major, lasting achievements of all this work is undoubtedly the seven volumes of collected and annotated folktales, a major aspect of Kammu culture. These appeared as *Folk Tales from Kammu* in the monograph series of the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, and are available in libraries worldwide. These "pearls of Kammu literature," which include such gems as the full range of the repertoires of individual story-tellers, form a substantial contribution to folklore studies, to Asian Studies, and to world literature. This is from an area of the world that until recently did not use writing to record this wealth of tales. In this connection, one must mention another important milestone, the *Kammu-Lao Dictionary*, which initiated the use of the Kammu writing system devised on the basis of the Laotian alphabet by Kristina and her colleagues.

The bibliography that follows this text lists Kristina's own works and indicates both her own range of interests (from linguistics to kinship to hunting rituals and Kammu culinary delights, as well as indigenous knowledge regarding invasive weed suppression in Southeast Asia, one of many subjects that I remember having vivid discussions about at her house). It also speaks to her persistence in pursuing the wealth of Kammu folklore, as well as the range and steadfastness of her collaboration with others in these endeavors. The Kammu project, in recent years based at the Lund University's Department of Linguistics and Phonetics has a website that is a veritable treasure trove, as is Damrong Tayanin's separate Kammu webpage there (see the references); the project's emphasis on collaborative aspects and its multidisciplinary character can be gleaned from the website. There are multiple listings of publications, Kristina's and others, and other resources on Kammu heritage, including folklore, music,

religion and divination, language, and the overall experience of an indigenous people, as well as a text on “How to Enter a Kammu Village and Work with Kammu People,” by Damrong Tayanin and Kristina Lindell. The text is characteristic not only for the tell-tale emphasis on collaboration, but also for how it suggests Kristina’s related, indeed inseparable emphasis on cultural aspects of manners in Asian societies, which always informed both her interaction with interlocutors and colleagues and her scholarly writings, including on topics such as Chinese concepts of female beauty. Indeed, she always remained a Sinologist, reminiscent of Wolfram Eberhard, who is famous for his researches in Southern Chinese folklore traditions and who shared her combined interests in Chinese traditions and also encouraged her Kammu research—as well as making suggestions for the comparative work that is now possible.

Finally, a few more personal observations. When I myself entered the Lund University Asian Languages Department as a beginning undergraduate in 1978, the Asian world languages still fell into the category of “Other Languages” (in Swedish, “Övriga Språk”) at Lund University. The phrase, which in Swedish starts with the very last letter of the alphabet and therefore ended up at the very end of the course offerings, was sometimes used as a humorous sign at the department door, greeting the many students who still found their way to the department. They would receive a warm welcome and serious encouragement from Kristina and the department, which was continuously expanding. Kristina clearly succeeded in communicating both to university leaders and certainly to her students, the important but evidently not self-evident truths that the Asian languages we had come to learn (Chinese, Japanese, and so on) were major living world languages, not oddities or curiosities confined to the library; that they were first of all tools of learning and communication, which we might use to do all sorts of things (anything from cell phone screen applications to learning yet another language using materials composed in the first!); and, finally, that we would indeed master these tools, armed with a combination of good methods, hard work, and dedication. In the case of Chinese, she supplied the first part (relying on her own pedagogy and textbooks emphasizing starting from a living grasp of the phonology, rhythm, and feel of the language. In our case this was accomplished through John DeFrancis’s set of textbooks and tapes, supplemented with Kristina’s own texts. She encouraged us to bring the latter, and to embrace the intimate relation between language and culture, in body language, gestures in context, and other related modes of expression and manners so crucial for the student who really wants to learn how to communicate.

Kristina herself was indeed an extraordinary linguist. Apart from her Asian languages, she also knew a host of European languages. It made a deep impression on a young student like me, when she remarked that, after someone had pronounced that Latin was a dead language, she was corresponding in Latin

at the time with a Russian scholar colleague because it was the one language that they had in common. (Of course, at the same time she urged me to learn Russian, too—another important scholarly language). Somewhat overwhelmed, I asked her how long it might take before I “knew” Chinese. She replied that if I meant to use it like a Chinese scholar, I should give it 15 years. If, on the other hand, I meant to reach a functional level where, when necessary, I was able to ask for more explanation and help in Chinese, no more than one year was necessary. She was right again, of course, on both counts. She revealed how the rumored difficulty of languages was but a smokescreen covering up either bad teaching methods or ignorance about the world. I think no other teacher ever inspired more faith in the value of independent hard work and confidence. More than that, she taught us to respect the profound knowledge and meaning enshrined in languages, and in the richness of their carefully crafted treasure houses of folklore.

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Webpages

Damrong Tayanin's Kammu webpage

<http://www.ling.lu.se/persons/Damrong/kammu.html>

The Kammu project web page, based at the Department of Linguistics and Phonetics, Lund University, Sweden

<http://www.ling.lu.se/research/profileareas/KammuResearch/>

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS BY KRISTINA LINDELL

A list compiled by Magnus Fiskesjö, with special thanks to Jan-Olof Svantesson, Håkan Lundström, Li Daoyong, and Peter Knecht. This list includes books only. For articles, reviews and other bibliographic information, see the Kammu Project website. Abbreviations used here: SIAS, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies; NIAS, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (successor to SIAS).

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