

Dan Lev and Herb Feith

Dan Lev first met Herb Feith in 1957 when they joined the Modern Indonesia Project at Cornell University (CMIP) under the leadership of George McT. Kahin. Unlike Herb, who had lived in Indonesia from 1951-56 prior to going to Cornell, the graduate students in the Modern Indonesia Project including Dan Lev – who had previously completed his law degree at Miami University, Ohio – were just starting out on their path to engagement with Indonesia. The time they shared together at Cornell was, however, brief for Dan would leave for a three-year period of fieldwork in Indonesia on a full Ford Foundation scholarship in 1958.

Contemporaries of Herb's and Dan's at the CMIP in the late 1950s and early 1960s remember the fellowship and community experienced there as intense and unique. This community was facilitated by, and symbolised in, the building the Project occupied at 102 West Avenue. As Arlene and Dan Lev themselves described it in an obituary for Soemarsaid Moertono, a fellow resident at 102 in the early 1960s, the building housed a “cohesive company of graduate students, few of whom, probably, ever found that kind of community again” [Dan and Arlene Lev, ‘In memoriam: Soemarsaid Moertono, 1922-1987’, *Indonesia*, 44 (October 1987), 141—142]. The building housing the Project on 102 West Avenue was more than a centre for study, it was also a place of great social exchange for the students there who included many Indonesians, as well as Americans and other Westerners like Herb. In his tribute to 102 West Avenue, in a essay written for the journal *Indonesia* in 1989, George McT Kahin describes the particular impact Dan Lev had on the place;

“Also important in extending the building’s life was the imagination and unusual engineering prowess of one of the early CMIP fellowship holders, Daniel S. Lev, the only member of the Project to have held a carpenter’s license. (Also known for other accomplishments, he is now professor of political science at the University of Washington.) Indeed, without his input the building might well have much earlier been condemned as office space (as well as for living quarters), for by 1962 the rapid sagging of the first floor into the basement seemed to portend the whole building’s imminent collapse. Returning in that year from field research in Indonesia, Dan promptly took measure of this depressing situation—and perhaps of his prospects for long having a room in which to write up his dissertation! Requesting only \$50 from the Project’s emergency fund, he returned from an Ithaca construction firm with two

second-hand adjustable six-foot steel jack posts. These he inserted at just the correct points and cranked them up a good foot under the beams that were then hesitatingly holding up the first floor. Except for a few areas of only six to eight inches of sagging the building has stood—however precariously—ever since.”

[‘Cornell’s Modern Indonesia Project’, *Indonesia*, 48 (October 1989), 1—25]

Dan and his wife Arlene lived in Indonesia from 1958-61, with Dan carrying out research for his doctorate. Though he had initially intended to study the Indonesian legal system, soon after arriving at Cornell Kahin urged Dan to shift his focus to the political, and the transition to Guided Democracy – as a sort of sequel to Herb’s own thesis on the period of parliamentary democracy in the 1950s.

In August 1961, Herb, now a Research Fellow with the Research School for Pacific Studies at the Australian National University, travelled to Indonesia for fieldwork and stayed with Dan and Arlene in Jakarta for several months. Whilst there he and Dan embarked on a joint research and writing project on the regionalist rebellions in Sumatra and Sulawesi [Herb Feith & Daniel S. Lev, ‘The End of the Indonesian Rebellion’, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 1963), 32-46]. Following an intensive period of research in Indonesia Herb returned to Canberra and the two, now extremely close friends, engaged in a long-distance co-writing process. Their correspondence for several months after Herb returned home, indicates that each was often frustrated by their progress. Dan later remarked that he and Herb had in the end quite different opinions about the type of conclusions they should draw from the research. The result was a compromise that he says, satisfied neither of them.

It was their close friendship and immense mutual respect, however, that always allowed for an easy exchange of frank views between Dan and Herb no more so than at a time when they and their fellow ‘Indonesia experts’ were struggling to interpret and write about the political situation in Indonesia in the mid-1960s. Though often one of Herb’s greatest critics, Dan was also one of his most fervent supporters. In a letter to Herb in February 1965 in response to Herb’s question “Should one shut up and find refuge in non-political or non-contemporary subjects, or is that running away from the problem?”, Dan responded emphatically:

“And, my god, don’t even think about not writing more about these tender problems; who else would or could? But, Christ, I too wish there were some way of determining just how far one can go to call as ass an ass and a silliness a silliness and even a spade a spade...”

Conversation and debate between the two friends about Indonesian politics, world politics and, increasingly in the 1970s, peace issues, was constant across the years and oceans. In 1986 a working relationship resumed when Herb and Monash graduate students Richard Tanter and Ken Young conceived of the idea of hosting a conference there around Dan’s presence in Australia at the ANU where he was to be a Visiting Fellow. A conference on the politics of middle class Indonesia was held late that year and a book from the conference, edited by Tanter and Young later published as *The Politics of Middle Class Indonesia* (Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990). In the early stages of devising the parameters for the conference Herb was greatly energised and wrote to Dan, “Yes, it is coming to look very much like a reunion of the old gang...” During his visit to Melbourne Dan stayed for some nights with Herb and Betty at their Kyarra Rd home, where he met Herb’s ninety-year old father, Arthur, with whom he enjoyed chatting and joking in Yiddish.

Dan and Herb shared a compassion for humanity and a desire to work for its betterment. Dan’s unfinished biography of Yap Thiam Hien, the indomitable Chinese Indonesian fighter for human rights and the rule of law in whose honour is named an annual award for human rights in Indonesia, points to another area of shared concern. Herb’s interest in the situation of the ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesia dates from the late 1950s when his letter to the editor of the *New York Times* highlighted their plight. Perhaps it was their common Jewish background that also led to acute concern for Indonesia’s persecuted ethnic minority, but religion or Jewishness was never something the friends discussed. After Herb’s death, Dan reflected on Herb’s ‘Viennese’ Jewishness as being typically benign.

Following Herb’s sudden death in November 2001, Dan Lev presented the inaugural Herb Feith Memorial Lecture in the following year. Dan used the lecture to revisit the debate between Herb and Harry Benda, triggered by Benda’s review of *Decline of Constitutional Democracy*. As Dan put it, “Benda took Feith to task for ignoring an Indonesian cultural gravity inherited from pre-colonial and colonial history” [‘Conceptual

Filters and Obfuscation in the Study of Indonesian Politics’, Inaugural Herb Feith Memorial Lecture, November 2002]. Dan’s richly textured lecture covering decades of political and legal change, encouraged Indonesianists to reflect not only on the significance of the approach taken by Feith in *Decline*, but to consider forty years on, that;

“Many of us – scholars, public intellectuals, policy makers in and out of Indonesia and every other country in the world – remain devoted to grand myths that operate as filters, predisposing us to avoid the empirically obvious in favour of the conceptually obscure.”

Dan Lev was a founding member of the Board of the Herb Feith Foundation and though illness had kept him from visiting Australia in the year before his death, from his home in Seattle he remained keenly attentive to its plans and operations.

At the centre of Dan’s and Herb’s friendship was a passion for Indonesia, humanity and importantly, also music. Although there were long periods during which they did not meet, their closeness remained. In 1983, again Dan wrote to Herb;

“A letter apropos of absolutely nothing, except that Louie, on his violin, slipped from Beethoven into Bach, whose association with you never seems to leave me. So I stopped writing my essays for George and decided to write to you....

He went on,

I’m not really sure what you’ve been up to. Someone or other informed me, not long ago, that you had become a vegetarian – congratulations – which did not surprise me but made me reflect more on your odyssey. Where exactly has it taken you?

I wish I could be certain why I ask. Partly out of love, probably, but also because unfairly I want it to have some meaning for others of us.”

Dan spoke of the importance of Herb in his life and in the lives of their other friends, as someone who always challenged, not only the way they saw the world, but ultimately how they lived within it. Dan Lev passed away after a short struggle with cancer on 29 July 2006, aged 72 years.

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