Many Voices, One Life: Dealing with Memory and “Telling” in the Biography of Herb Feith

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The headline in Kompas, Indonesia’s largest national daily read simply “Herb Feith Meninggal Dunia”—Herb Feith has died. The title of Goenawan Mohammad’s weekly Tempo column was even more brief: “Herb.” There was a familiarity, an affection, and respect in these headlines that is sometimes used for heads of state, royalty, religious leaders, and celebrities, but very rarely for foreign intellectuals. Feith died instantly when he was struck by a train while walking his bicycle over a railway crossing in Melbourne on 15 November 2001. He was seventy-one years old. Only a week earlier he had returned from yet another visit to Indonesia, his second home and the focus of his professional career for fifty years.

Many Voices

Following Herb Feith’s death, news articles and obituaries were carried in all of Indonesia’s major dailies. The affection with which Indonesians responded to the passing of a foreign academic was extraordinary. Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul has called on
indigenous historians of Southeast Asia in particular, and foreign ones as well, to write history about the “in between” locations. “Whenever and wherever there is a transnational situation, outside-inside is a false dichotomy and global-local are inseparable parts of the same process.”¹ The example of Herb Feith is an ideal one through which to also examine Winichakul’s related question about Southeast Asian indigeneity, “Who is a native?”² Many of my Indonesian informants described Feith as “more Indonesian than Indonesians.” Academic and columnist Lambang Trijono explained the close connection Feith had with Indonesia in his obituary for him: “He cared about Indonesia more than any prominent figure, even among Indonesians themselves. It will be difficult to find another like him.”³

A refugee to Australia from Nazi-occupied Vienna at the age of eight, Herbert Feith was naturalised shortly after and eventually married an Australian wife. Yet Feith called himself an “Indonesia person” and a “peace person.” Somewhere between the global and the local are individuals like Feith who stand astride these dichotomies.

Writing a life—a biography—lends itself completely to narrative. Though we know that there are alternative ways in which a life story may be told or written, none is more popular and more powerful than when the story is recounted as a journey, with causal effect, motive, build up, and ending (death). The narrative is formed from myriad voices. As Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson remark, such writing can be described as “history through composite autobiography.”⁴ The partial and indeed “imaginary” narratives of Herb Feith’s life, told to me by his family, friends, colleagues, and students in Australia, Indonesia, East Timor, and the United States, at first struck me as overwhelmingly similar. I soon realised, however, that their revelatory power can be found not only in the literal account of what happened and when—the content—but in the symbolic, the “imaginary” forms of the “telling.”⁵ Across cultures, the “literal” (or factual) responses from my informants about Herb Feith were uniform across narrative themes like physicality and
image, knowledge and spirituality. But the forms of their telling revealed different interpretations.

One Life

Herb Feith’s engagement with Indonesia began when he was an undergraduate in Melbourne in the late 1940s, at the time when Indonesians were fighting for independence from their Dutch colonisers. In Australia, there was considerable support among the labour and union movements for the Indonesian independence struggle, and eventually support also from the Australian government itself. Australia played a significant role in the diplomatic steps that led to the Round Table Conference at The Hague, where the Dutch and Indonesians drafted a United Nations-backed agreement. The Netherlands finally surrendered authority over the archipelagic colony to the Indonesians in December 1949. Herb Feith knew little about Indonesia when he arrived there in June 1951 for what was to be a two-year stint as a civil servant (pegawai) earning a local salary in the Ministry for Information. He had read independence leader Sutan Sjahrir’s newly-published memoirs of his time as a prisoner of the Dutch; he had studied the recent political history—albeit from an international relations perspective—and could speak only a few phrases in the Indonesian language. Two years later, returning to Australia for a brief interlude to get married and write his master’s thesis, among other things, Herb Feith knew more about Indonesian politics than perhaps any other Australian at that time (and probably more than any other foreigner), spoke the language fluently—with a Javanese accent—and was personally deeply connected to Indonesia’s rapidly changing present and hopeful future.

Herb Feith is internationally renowned for his scholarship and teaching in the field of Indonesian studies; he was one of the first and most prominent Australian academics in this field, beginning in the late 1950s. His books and articles written in the 1960s are still read by students of Indonesian politics today, and his opinions on Indonesia’s future were sought from people both outside and inside
Indonesia until the last day of his life. Feith played a pioneering role in building people-to-people relations between Indonesians and Australians in the period soon after independence, and, upon his death, the Australian government established a scholarship for an Indonesian student in his name.

Born in 1930 to Jewish parents, Herb Feith formed close friendships with many from the Student Christian Movement at Melbourne University in the late 1940s, including his wife-to-be, Betty. The activities and interests of a group of these students led—ten years before the foundation of the American Peace Corps—to the formation of the Volunteer Graduate Scheme in Indonesia, which is today Australian Volunteers International. The Scheme was based on an ethos of “being useful” to the new Indonesian state and, most important, at a time when foreign “experts” there were paid many times more than local workers, of living alongside and earning the same salary as Indonesians. Feith lived in Indonesia as the first volunteer under this scheme from 1951 to 1953, and again from 1954 to 1956 (this time with his wife), working for both periods at the Ministry for Information. As he wrote in a Graduate Scheme bulletin during his second term as a volunteer in Indonesia, the fundamental basis of the exchange was idealistic, based upon a moral vision.

These young people assert by the way they live, that racial equality is real. By having natural and friendly relations with Indonesians on a basis of mutual respect, they help to do away with the colonial legacy of mistrust and misunderstanding, which to so large an extent continues to affect relations between coloured people and white.7

The moral commitment articulated here would remain throughout his lifetime.

During his time working in the Indonesian civil service, Feith rubbed shoulders, and became friends in many cases, with some of the leading political thinkers of the time, including Soedjatmoko and Sutan Sjahrir from the Indonesian Socialist Party, and other politicians, bureaucrats, and students, including Roeslan Abdulgani, Nugroho
Notosusanto, and Onghokham. These were essentially his fieldwork years during which he gathered data and sufficient insight to complete two monographs and, most significantly, his dissertation.

Herb Feith went from Indonesia to George Kahin’s newly established Modern Indonesia Project at Cornell University in 1957, where he was greatly influenced by Kahin and fellow students, including Daniel Lev, Benedict Anderson, and David Penny, as well as by Indonesians like Deliar Noer and Selo Soemardjan. His dissertation, published in 1962 as *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*, is an account and analysis of Indonesia’s first attempt at parliamentary democracy in the 1950s. The book was met with acclaim at the time, but also sparked a seminal debate with Harry J. Benda about the place of “Western” style analyses of Indonesian politics and history. Still today, Feith’s book remains the foremost account of this period of Indonesia’s political history and was recently re-published in Indonesia.

Returning to Australia in the early 1960s, Feith, together with historian (and later Sukarno biographer) John Legge, established Monash University’s reputation as a world-leading centre for the study of Southeast Asia, and Indonesia in particular. He attracted research students from across the country and around the world to work with him at Monash. His scholarship was lauded for its deep understanding of the political scene in Indonesia. Herb Feith was also a pioneer of peace studies, teaching in this area in Australian universities in the 1970s and 1980s. An activist on human rights and peace issues since his teens, he was a participant in the World Order Models project in the 1980s, working towards blending his scholarship on Indonesia and the “Third World” with his personal and moral commitment to peace.

**The Context: Feith and Reformasi Indonesia**

**Timing**

Herb Feith spent a large part of the last years of his life in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. After retiring from his university position in
Melbourne, he returned to Indonesia to teach at Gadjah Mada University, again as a volunteer with the organization he helped to establish in the early 1950s. His timing could not have been better from a political scientist’s and Indonesianist’s point of view, but perhaps even more from that of an activist. In 1995, when Feith and his wife arrived in Yogyakarta, things were shifting within Indonesian politics and society; there was a growing disquiet about the tight grip of the New Order government, and there were rumblings for change, especially on the university campuses. Though he was in Australia in May 1998 when the Suharto government fell, Feith returned to Yogyakarta later that year into the midst of what, for him, had been a long-awaited reformasi Indonesia. Suddenly, Indonesians were able to talk openly again about the chance of democracy and free elections. Herb Feith found himself part of the growing celebrity or “pengamat” (observer) intellectual culture that blossomed in Indonesia in the reformasi period, as the thirst for knowledge about Indonesia’s history and the potential for its future reached new heights. He was well-known in Indonesia’s academic and political circles and among Indonesian students who studied at Monash or other Australian universities, and was called on for comment both when he was in Indonesia and at home in Melbourne. Now Feith became known to Indonesia’s mass newspaper-reading public. When he died in Melbourne on 15 November 2001, he had only a week earlier appeared in the national newspapers in stories covering the fiftieth anniversary celebrations held in Jakarta for Australian Volunteers International at which he spoke as the organization’s first volunteer.

Herb Feith’s death was covered by all of Indonesia’s major national newspapers. The timing of his death at around six in the evening Melbourne time (3 p.m. in Jakarta) meant that it was included in the next morning’s Indonesian newspapers, including Kompas, Jakarta Post, Suara Pembaruan and Tempo.com (which included three separate pieces), and in some cases, on their internet websites that evening. In contrast, the timing meant that Feith’s accidental death was not covered the next day in the city in which it
occurred; Melbourne’s *The Age* and *Herald Sun* did not carry the story until Saturday, two days after the fact. *The Age* included a quotation about Feith published the previous day in the *Jakarta Post*. The timing and nature of his death, together with his often long-standing personal relationships with many working for these Indonesian publications, partly explain the considerable and immediate coverage given to it. Nonetheless, it was extraordinary for any scholar, let alone a foreigner. His long engagement with Indonesia led to a profound connection with this place and people. It was a tie that ran deep and was recognised in memorials celebrated for him in Jakarta and Yogyakarta in Indonesia and in Dili, Timor-Leste.

*Celebrity Intellectuals, Biography and Memoir after the New Order*

“The writers of history, just like journalists, tend to prefer dramatic events and extraordinary people.”

The end of the New Order allowed for an opening up of Indonesia’s history and for room to challenge the national narratives. In the immediate post-New Order period, memoir and biography experienced a renaissance in Indonesian publishing. As David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn write with reference to India, the “life-history approach is a means of breaking the silences imposed by society and history.” Much recent scholarship on post-New Order historiography in Indonesia demonstrates that this type of reading is applicable to a great number of memoirs written by enemies or “victims” of the New Order, including political prisoners, former military leaders, and others associated with the 1965 so-called coup attempt and subsequent massacre of communists. Theirs is often a drive to “set the record straight.” Writer and former political prisoner Hersri Setiawan has spoken about a process of “demokratisasi sejarah,” or democratisation of history, in which a diversity of voices and perspectives are heard, and in which personal truth sits alongside collective remembrance. In the immediate post-New Order period,
there was also a yearning to remember the nation’s nationalist past and the great leaders of that time, including Sjahrir, Mohammad Hatta, and also Sukarno, in a nostalgic yet also highly political trip back to the future, back to the idealistic and heady days of the early nation-state. Overwhelmingly, too, there was a desire to react against the oppressive regulation and uniformity of the national “history” more broadly. As Gerry van Klinken explains of the atmosphere at this time, “Out of the market of ideas, now much less controlled by state censors, were a host of alternative histories, whose persuasive power could determine not merely the future of the nation-building project, but perhaps that of the Indonesian nation itself.”

The increased demand by journalists for comment from the “celebrity intellectual” (pengamat), or “seasonal intellectual” (intelektual musiman) in the reformasi period can also be understood in this context. Herb Feith’s unique position as an expert (pakar) on Indonesian politics and history, whose engagement with Indonesia spanned almost the life of the nation itself, meant he was perfectly placed to not only help Indonesians learn about the past, but to provide guidance towards a democratic future. In the midst of this increasing trend toward looking to the intellectual, or pakar, of which Feith was exemplary, his sudden death was all the more prominent.

Questions about Power

“Voice gentle as a thunderclap”

In his obituary for Herb Feith published in his Catatan Pinggir column in Tempo magazine, Goenawan Mohammad wrote a moving, almost poetic, tribute, which immediately touched on Feith’s closeness to Indonesia and Indonesians. “Herb Feith died just like many Indonesians die. On the road. Thin. Haggard. In some kind of clash or violence, between the powerful and the powerless.” The death, he continued, was extraordinarily incongruous to the peacefulness with which Herb Feith lived his life. In death, Feith was
rendered powerless before the might of the machine. His weaknesses—his declining hearing and propensity for deep and distracting thought—led to calamity, and linked him in his death even more to the people about whom he cared greatly, Indonesia’s *wong cilik*. Yet in contrast, in life, Feith wielded great, but quiet and unassuming, power.

Angela Romano uses Benedict Anderson’s thesis of Javanese power and the ascetic (*resi*)—one who chooses an austere life of self denial—to understand the role of the intellectual in Indonesia’s contemporary media. “The intense charismatic and spiritual power of the *resi* rested upon their sacrifice of self-interest…. The *resi* only returned to the centre of power to warn of faults that threatened to fracture or annihilate the political kingdom.” Historically, Romano continues, intellectuals in Indonesia are regarded as “mobilisers for social change.” Anderson’s description of the European or Western conception of power—power based on the ability to wield authority in one’s relations with others—contrasts strongly, he has argued, to the Javanese concept of power, which exists independent of its possible uses. According to this model, power in the Javanese sense is an “intangible, mysterious and divine energy” originating from a homogenous source. One cannot gain power through commanding others to obey; the power must be inherent and simply present. The Indonesian response to Feith’s death, in both written and oral testimony, revealed something that was increasingly apparent in the last years of his life. He possessed a considerable “power” for influence and attracted veneration not easily explained in a Western sense.

Indonesianist and biographer Angus McIntyre has warned against the dangers of “cultural” interpretations of memory and remembering. McIntyre has long argued that the biographer should seek out instead the “universal and unique aspects of human experience.” In the course of my research for a biography of Herb Feith, this approach has guided my investigation. However, there came a point, sometime after collecting the more than one hundred interviews with people who knew Feith from Australia, Indonesia,
and around the world—interviews that make up a large part of my research—that a cultural reading of this material seemed at least partially necessary. It seemed wrong to ignore what were increasingly obvious and consistent differences between the ways Herb Feith was remembered by my Indonesian sources and by my Western ones.

Returning to Australia from a visit to Indonesia and East Timor, I found that I had been on something of an emotional journey, transported by my interviewees. The fact that those I interviewed were mostly male added to my surprise realisation that we—the interviewee and I—often shed tears when we talked about Feith. This was in contrast to my experience with non-Indonesians, also mainly male. I began to wonder whether the explanation for this difference was simply as obvious as the idea that Australian men are socialised to hide such displays of emotion—displays regarded as a sign of weakness—which is bundled up in the tropes of Australian maleness and “mateship.” Indeed, the same kind of generalisation or relativism works to explain the response of my Indonesian interviewees: that emotion and Asian sensibility are somehow matched. In step with McIntyre’s warnings, however, I dismissed both observations as far too simplistic and even dangerous. There was, though, a deeper and more useful approach to the differences in ways of remembering I had initially recognised as emotional ones. From here, I began to investigate these Indonesian “memories” of Herb Feith, both as told to me, and as recorded in testimonials written after his death, and a number of themes began to emerge.

Remembering Herb Feith

“Who is a native?”

An investigation of the ways Herb Feith is remembered needs to begin with the question of who Herb Feith was to my interviewees. Was he teacher to their student; researcher to their informant; donor to their recipient; advisor to their petitioner? Critically, for my
Indonesian informants, was he a foreigner (Westerner)? Though it may appear a strange question to pose, given his legal status and ethnicity, in Feith’s case, it is a valid one. Herb Feith’s status as a volunteer, working in the 1950s with the Ministry for Information, and again in the 1990s as a lecturer at Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta, colours his relationships there.

Some of my informants fell into categories that were, in a sense, subordinate—many were his students. Yet, in testimony by members of this group, the sentiment expressed about their teacher was overwhelmingly one of equality. Commonly, they reveal their initial surprise and lasting admiration for a professor who listened, questioned, and genuinely embraced their ideas as he did their way of life. As one such student, Eclid Li, recalled:

> At his house, in the area of Bulak Sumur, Herb received guests from various student groups, from high school kids, undergraduates, postgraduates, lecturers, researchers, journalists, NGO activists, those fighting for peace, and others. Everyone was given the same attention…. The cooking was Central Javanese because it was cooked by an old local Javanese woman, and we talked about daily events.

In Australia, too, Herb Feith posed challenges to what were then accepted social norms about the relationship between student and teacher. He is remembered by his Australian students as a friend, and as someone who brought to them a great excitement for learning, and especially for Indonesia. Feith’s style of teaching was inclusive and consultative. His lectures were often given over to group activity, and, as head of the Politics Department, he was among the first at his university to assert the students’ case for alternative forms of assessment to traditional examination. This was the 1970s, after all, and such open methods of teaching would soon become widespread in Australian universities. In Indonesia, however, even when he returned to teach in the 1990s, Feith brought an egalitarianism to his classes which was entirely new for these students. He had seemingly endless amounts of time to give his students, both in Yogyakarta and
Melbourne. He welcomed them into his home at any time, inviting them to choose books from his personal library or to just sit on the front porch to chat. In Indonesia, Feith’s position as a foreigner and university professor led to fixed ideas about his behaviour, his relationships, and his lifestyle. He routinely turned these preconceptions on their heads. The fact that he was a foreigner who cared so much about their country and, they believed, about them as individuals, no doubt also enhanced his “aura.” It could be also argued that this student-teacher relationship can be explained in more universal terms: the students’ attraction to a teacher who is “worldly,” experienced, and learned in ways they are not. Though perhaps not unique, Feith’s approach to his role of teacher was seldom seen in either of the countries in which he worked.

My Australian informants had had differing relationships with Herb Feith: those I spoke to had known him as husband, father, colleague, friend, teacher, researcher, activist, or fellow volunteer. Unsurprisingly for someone whose life was his work, some of Feith’s strongest friendships were with colleagues and former students. Discounting the uniquely intimate testimonies of his family, the testimonies of Australians who knew Feith reveal relationships that resembled those he shared with Indonesians—colleague, teacher, and friend. The difference was nationality. Or was it? Winichakul’s question about identity—who is a native?—resonates. Feith saw the world and his own sense of belonging within it—his identity—rarely in terms of nation, but rather in global, local, and human terms, and he similarly encouraged this sort of political thinking in his students. His vision of the world was holistic, ignoring so-called East and West, North and South, First and Third dichotomies. He felt most contented within local communities of people with whom he shared similar passions and goals; he made lasting connections with individuals.

Various narrative themes quickly emerged from my study of the many memories and stories I collected from my sources in Indonesia, Australia, and elsewhere. Where at first I wondered if
there was only one universal Herb Feith story, as I looked more closely, the forms of storytelling revealed crucial differences.

**Physicality**

In my interviews, both with Indonesians and non-Indonesians, and in the collection of testimonials to him, the physical Feith, his attire, his mannerisms, his way of living and personal habits are as frequently recalled as his scholarship. Though it may seem a superficial element in the remembering of someone, I was soon aware that there was a great deal more being said. The image of Herb Feith that penetrates most of the memory people have of him is universal. Herb Feith and his bicycle. Herb Feith and his unkempt woolly sweater, or in warmer climes, batik shirt. His beaming, affirming smile and his sharp probing gaze. For most, these concrete details were a safe place from which to remember Feith and from which to start a narrative of their long, short, intense, or distant relationship with him. For me, this image was, in subtle ways, interpreted and reflected upon differently by my Indonesian informants and by non-Indonesians.

Sorting through boxes of seemingly endless scraps of paper with handwritten notes, memoranda, clippings, photocopies, and lists, a friend and I discovered an article from an Indonesian newspaper featuring an interview Herb Feith gave when he was living in Yogyakarta in the late 1990s. The interview was primarily to discuss Indonesia’s approaching 1999 general elections, the first democratic elections since the period of parliamentary democracy in the 1950s. As the author of the seminal work on this period of Indonesia’s political history, Feith was in high demand for media comment as Indonesians looked forward to these elections. Accompanying the interview is a large photograph. Feith is dressed in his sarong and sandals and stands next to his bicycle. A wide smile beams out from the midst of his white beard. My fellow sorter is an Australian Indonesianist, former student, and dear friend of Feith’s. He peered at the photograph fondly and said, “Herb really needed a PR person didn’t he?”
In both Indonesia and Australia, this image of Herb Feith is almost ubiquitous, to the point, as my fellow sorter was intimating, where it might be seen as a caricature. He revealed a common sentiment held by many people I spoke with in Australia about this image, one of endearment but clearly also some discomfort. As he saw it, the journalist was somehow poking fun at Feith by including such an image alongside a sophisticated discussion of Indonesian politics and history. This sense among his Australian friends about his image or physicality was not new. Sometime in the early to mid-1960s, on a trip to Indonesia, Feith managed to secure a meeting with Subandrio, minister for foreign affairs in the Sukarno “Guided Democracy” government. Before heading to his meeting with Subandrio, Feith called in at the Australian Embassy to visit the ambassador, Keith (Mick) Shann. This was the time of Konfrontasi, a period former diplomat Pierre Hutton and others describe as a low point in Australia-Indonesia relations, a time when relations had deteriorated to the point of being antagonistic. The embassy was increasingly isolated from the Indonesian government and had very little access to even the most lowly of its representatives. Feith’s meeting with Subandrio was therefore an event the ambassador recognised as extremely important. As was usual for Feith when in Indonesia, he arrived at the embassy that day dressed in a casual shirt and trousers with sandals. Shann was so appalled that Feith could be heading to the foreign minister’s office dressed as he was, that he sent one of his staff to Pasar Baru to buy him a pair of shoes.

The response from Indonesians has been quite different. A great deal of the remembering of Feith by Indonesians includes this or similar images: “the person I met that morning was an old professor, wearing thick-rimmed glasses, a cloth sarung and shirt.” In the winter, riding his bicycle from home to the university, Feith wrapped a sarong around his neck and shoulders for warmth. For Indonesian students in Melbourne from the 1970s until the 1990s, this was an image strongly infused with symbolism. Former Monash students Mohamad Sobari and Fachry Ali explained that, in Indonesia, wong cilik Muslims wore their sarongs in this way, and by
doing so Feith was demonstrating his solidarity with them. Similarly, another of his former students and close friends, Ichlasul Amal, described the symbolic importance of the bicycle for Indonesians, particularly those who knew him at Monash or in Yogyakarta in the 1990s. In the rapidly modernising city of Yogyakarta, bicycles were being replaced by motorbikes and cars. Riding their bikes around town, Feith and his wife were an unusual sight, not the least because they were foreigners and wore safety helmets. His choice of transportation meant that he was visible and close to the people on the street. The speed at which he moved was such that he could call out to people he passed with time to hear a response, rather than whizzing by on a motorbike or being hidden within the confines of a car. About his home in Australia, to which they were often invited when in Melbourne, Indonesians similarly comment on their surprise, but also deep admiration for his ascetic lifestyle. Ibu Ade Sitompul, who was a guest at the Feith home in Melbourne, recalled that: “the conditions of the home of this professor were very simple, when in fact he could have chosen to live in a much better way.”

Herb Feith’s choice of a simple and austere lifestyle was constant throughout his life, even as he earned more and could afford greater comforts. His parents arrived in Australia with very little, indeed requiring a guarantor to sponsor their admittance. From them, he learned that frugality and comfort could both be enjoyed. As they slowly built up their business, the family spent their money on acquiring books, magazines, and records, and later on travel, not on non-essential material possessions. Feith’s exposure to the deep poverty he first encountered in Jakarta in 1951, and his consciousness of the widening wealth gap, made a lasting impression on him. He and his wife, Betty, lived in the same modest house during their entire married life after settling in Melbourne in the early sixties. After the deaths of his father and mother left him with considerable wealth in property and other assets, Feith and his wife set up a philanthropic trust. Feith’s austerity was at once independent of, and entirely embedded in, his engagement with Indonesia and the Third World more generally. However, this lifestyle was not entirely
uncontested by those closest to him; while Feith’s children and father shared his charitable nature, they sometimes found themselves engaged in long and agonising negotiations with him over the ethics of making home improvements or certain “necessary” purchases.

Knowledge

Almost without exception, my informants lauded Feith’s knowledge as a teacher and scholar of Indonesian politics and history. Fifty years of close attention to Indonesian history, politics, and society; a fluency in the Indonesian language; and his unique early position as civil servant in Indonesia’s fledgling bureaucracy, imbued Feith with what most Indonesian informants agreed was a near “native perspective.”³³ Forty years after much of it was written, Herb Feith’s scholarship on Indonesian politics is still included on undergraduate reading lists in universities around the world. The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia is described as a magnum opus, a formidable and lasting analysis and narrative of the period of parliamentary democracy in Indonesia from 1950-1957, and many of my Indonesian informants, in particular, were able to quote its major theses back to me. Many of his other books, articles, and chapters are similarly regarded as seminal texts for the study of Indonesia’s political history.

Though prolific in his writing in the 1960s, Herb Feith published very little after the 1970s. As my Australian and American Indonesianist sources remember it, there was, in any case, little that was of great influence, at least in comparison to his early works. When they pondered on this fact, some admitted to wishing they had asked him for an explanation for it over the years. Instead, they were left to draw their own conclusions based mostly on assumptions about Feith’s encroaching activism, leftism, and perhaps some significant personal angst at the state of Indonesia’s politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

Various factors, professional, personal, and ideological, meant that, from this time on, he wrote far less about Indonesia. Feith’s rapid
ascent up the academic ranks to professor and department head in the early 1970s burdened him with often overwhelming administrative responsibilities. He, and those around him, quickly learned that his were not the skills of a manager. However, at the same time, he understood the influence of his position and used it most effectively to accommodate the concerns of his students, which also became his preoccupation—opposition to the Vietnam War and demands for reforms to university assessment policy. In practical terms, he had difficulty finding time to write, but, more important, Feith was searching for a new idea to help him to understand the Indonesia of the 1970s, in which the authoritarian rule of Suharto’s New Order was becoming more and more entrenched. This search took him to Bangladesh shortly after its declaration of independence to conduct field research, and also led him to study at the radical Centro Intercultural de Documentación founded by Ivan Illich in Cuernavaca, Mexico. But he stayed away from Indonesia in the 1970s, where many of his friends, and those who had been valuable resource people to him in the 1950s and 1960s, were either outlawed or co-opted by the New Order. 34 In the fall-out from conflicts in the former French colonies of Indochina, and new theory around the Third World, anti-establishment and peace paradigms grew in popularity in the West. Forever in search of new insights, and more than ever sure that his own future lay in activism, Feith jumped on board.

My informants expressed a near sorrow, a sense of loss for the “old Herb” who was ready with sharp political analysis to shed light on the Indonesian situation for them. They depict a “fading,” or deterioration, not only in the quantity of his output, but also in its quality. Feith, they told me, became naive, too vulnerable to rumour and gossip and quick to jump to conclusions. Put together with his irrepressible optimism about the ever-approaching end to the Suharto government and the triumph of people power, his fellow Indonesians felt they could no longer count on him for objective insight and knowledge. As evidence, they pointed—as academics are wont to do—to the slowing trickle of his scholarly publications after the early 1970s. Gone were the substantial pieces for leading
international scholarly journals and textbooks that laid down the blueprint for Indonesian Studies research and teaching. Instead, we find short think-pieces for church-sponsored bulletins, non-peer reviewed local publications, and NGO pamphlets.35

In their analysis of the development of the social sciences in Indonesia over the past fifty years, Vedi Hadiz and Daniel Dhakidae point to the fact that “it is generally regarded that Indonesian scholars have contributed much less to the international academic literature on their own country than [have] scholars of neighbouring countries….“36 The contributors to Hadiz and Dhakidae’s work, Social Science and Power in Indonesia, emphasise the thirty-two years of New Order rule, during which the state exercised considerable control over the tertiary education sector. Through political and economic controls, the state influenced what was taught and researched, which theoretical paradigms gained prominence, and which were marginalised. This led to what Hadiz and Dhakidae term the “bureaucratization of social science,” wherein social science careers and state patronage were closely intertwined, and academics were regularly recruited into state bureaucracies. The social sciences were largely co-opted into the New Order’s modernisation and development program, thereby limiting the influence of alternative views and causing a dearth of rigorous critical scholarship.37

In this climate—at the peak of the developmentalist paradigm’s hegemony in Indonesia in the 1970s and 1980s—one of the very few vehicles for such scholarship and debate was the Institute for Social and Economic Research, Education and Information (LP3ES) and its prestigious journal, Prisma.38 A foreign-funded institute, LP3ES, along with a few other small groups centred around universities and non-government organisations in the 1970s, developed critical social knowledge aimed at “exposing the assumptions and theories of modernization that dominated thinking about development in the Soeharto era.”39 In the late 1970s, it was to this small group of “critical thinkers” around LP3ES and Prisma that Herb Feith was drawn. He was attracted to their search for alternative ideas about Indonesia’s future, but also to their commitment to
rigorous intellectual inquiry that sought to reach out to Indonesians from all areas of society. For Prisma editors Dawam Rahardjo and Daniel Dhakidae, Feith’s contributions to debate, his encouragement, and his enthusiasm for the ongoing struggle to let critical and alternative views be heard, was crucial. His contribution to Indonesia’s knowledge capacity is remembered and calculated quite differently within Indonesia than it was by colleagues outside the country. Every time he travelled to Indonesia, or sent another in his place, Feith delivered armloads of books, journals, photocopied articles, and new research. He brought new ideas to what my informants described as a starved intellectual landscape, introducing new thinkers and theories from the outside world at a time when critical thought was suppressed in Indonesia. In today’s internet-connected, Google-accessible world, it is perhaps difficult to imagine just how important Feith’s contribution was at this time. He was described to me as a beacon of light and hope, a channel for new opportunities and therefore a person, not only of great knowledge himself, but also with undeniable power to bring and disseminate knowledge.

With his LP3ES friends, Herb Feith shared a passion for dependency theory as a counter to the New Order’s modernisation program.40 His article “Repressive Developmentalist Regimes,” though first presented at an international conference and thus a good candidate for publication in a major international political science journal, was instead published in the 1980 edition of Prisma. Dawam Rahardjo described the article, and Feith’s decision to publish it in Indonesia, as a lightning rod for further debate and a boost to the confidence of the intellectual community around LP3ES. By the early 1980s, Prisma and LP3ES were diminishing in influence as their German funding was withdrawn, but there was now a momentum for critical ideas, writing, and activism that would continue into the next decade and lay the foundations for a civil society movement in Indonesia. While many of Feith’s Indonesianist colleagues regarded his optimism as naiveté or misjudgement, for his Indonesian friends at LP3ES and around the fledgling civil society
movement, it was a source of great energy and confidence to sustain them in their struggle against the New Order juggernaut.\textsuperscript{41}

From the moment of Herb Feith’s initial engagement with Indonesia in 1951, Indonesians—university students, political actors, and Feith’s colleagues in the Ministry for Information and in other areas of government—sought him out for his knowledge. His knowledge of English was, of course, an asset, but more valuable than this was his knowledge of political theory, Australia, and the West. Feith’s access to leading political thinkers, and the friendships that consequently developed, were testament to their admiration and respect for him and what he knew. Yet none present him in their stories as an arrogant or self-righteous person, or even as an outsider. Feith saw his role as to learn from the Indonesians as much as to “assist” or “teach” them. As former head of Australian Volunteers International, Bill Armstrong, explained,

I think that some of those very fundamental principles that made and makes the Australian Volunteer program different even today than most of our counterparts overseas come out of the fundamental belief that Herb injected into it: the curiosity of learning, the living with and being part of and all that….\textsuperscript{42}

These qualities were also lauded by his Indonesianist colleagues. His mentor and teacher, George Kahin, wrote the foreword to Feith’s book \textit{The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia} and remarked:

Those who know Herbert Feith will be aware that his interest in Indonesia is not merely academic and that he has a profound personal affection for the country and its people. It might therefore be appropriate to mention that I believe this study constitutes a good example of the maxim that a scholar best serves such friendship through frankness of exposition and objectivity of appraisal.\textsuperscript{43}

However, it would be this nexus between friendship and academic honesty, which Kahin praised in 1962, that would be seen as a failing by Indonesianist colleagues a decade later.
From the beginning, Herb Feith was ambitious and well aware that gaining knowledge meant gaining power, but he also understood from the beginning that this carried with it significant responsibilities. These were responsibilities that Feith took very seriously from the moment he chose an academic path with Indonesia—already a place and a people to whom he was deeply connected—as his area of study. One could therefore also read Kahin’s foreword as a warning to Feith, whom he knew well. As the authoritarian and oppressive rule of the New Order regime became apparent by the early 1970s, something that weighed heavily on Feith, he began to see this responsibility in a different light and took a new approach.

Herb Feith’s opposition to the government, and his work, at this time, disseminating materials, including reading matter, to his friends in Indonesia, is still recognised by Indonesians as one of his great legacies. However, it also marked a critical shift in how he saw his role as an “Indonesia expert.” As Australian Indonesianist scholars saw it, his empathy, friendship, and emotional connection—once regarded as an essential aspect of his brilliant political analysis—had now disempowered him. His colleague and friend Jamie Mackie recalled Feith’s explanation to him in the mid-1970s for why he could not write a piece on the current political situation: “I cannot bring myself to write anything that will not contain the grounds for any hope for my friends in Indonesia who will read it. I feel I cannot disappoint them in that way.”

In Australia and the international “Indonesianist” community, Herb Feith’s knowledge of his subject remained sought after, almost longingly, until his death. As they all told me, his knowledge was passed on through his teaching. His enthusiasm and passion for Indonesia was contagious, and his students are among the most respected scholars in the field today. Nevertheless, among this community, the sense of a potential, somehow not realised, lingers.
**Morality and Spirituality**

In secular Australia, Herb Feith rarely discussed his spirituality, except with those like his friend Noelle Nicholls, herself a theological student and minister of the Uniting Church. Nicholls characterised Feith as someone who had “a very broad understanding of spiritual journey and other faiths.... He had a very mature understanding of faith and spirituality....”\(^{45}\) The only public occasion at which Herb Feith spoke about his spirituality or religion in a setting outside that provided by a church or other “spiritual” forum, was in Indonesia. In a talk entitled “Yahudi Abangan,” (Syncretic Jew), he told his Indonesian audience about his Jewish childhood and what he termed his “plural” approach to religion. Within the abangan conception of spirituality and religion, Feith found space to articulate his own fluid cultural, psychological, and emotional experiences of religion and spirituality. This was not an understanding that is easily accommodated within Western secularism, nor in the West’s institutionalised approach to a single religion.

Among my Australian informants, Nicholls’s insight into Feith’s spirituality is rare. Commonly, when we spoke about this aspect of him, my informants framed their understandings within the boundaries of institutional identifications, often discussing whether Feith might be considered a Christian. The secular recognise the universality of morality and humanity, which do not need interpretation within the scope of religion. Yet, interestingly, after his death, Herb Feith’s Australian friends referred to him as “saintly,” “Gandhi-like,” and, indeed, a “secular saint.” His simplicity of lifestyle and relations with his fellow humans were cited by my informants as expressions of this austere morality. This was a source of inspiration, but also provoked what may be described as a sort of social cringe among my Australian informants, like their responses to his dress and physical presentation. The austerity and simplicity of Feith’s lifestyle, though never forced upon others, sat as a reminder to many, particularly to his middle class academic friends, of their own shortcomings. Their inability to live up to his high moral
asceticism caused them a discomfort which, in part, served to diminish Feith’s power for them. And once again, this austerity seemed to expose a vulnerability and lack of sophistication in him. As Indonesian academic Najib Azca, a friend of Feith, explained: “some people feel that a humanitarian attitude is in fact naïveté.”

For Indonesians, however, memories of Feith’s austerity, simplicity, and “rendah hati,” or humility, are seen as a source of considerable power. The quality of pamrih, that is, selflessness, the absence of personal motives, was a further sign of power. Another explanation for the differing perception is bound up in expectations the Indonesians had about hierarchies of interaction in a relationship with a Western professor.

When Bondan Winarno met Feith in Melbourne in 1983, he was a young journalist just beginning his career. After Feith’s death, he told the story of his first meeting with Feith, who suggested that instead of talking in his hotel room, they sit in the park nearby:

Herb arrived right on time. As a young journalist, I felt really honoured. He immediately sat on the spring grass that was just showing its new green growth. From his leather bag that was already old and weathered, he took out some documents for me."

Even after the lapse of eighteen years, Winarno described the meeting in vivid detail and with great admiration for the humble man who chose to sit, not on a bench, but on the dry grass, and who shared his time and possessions with a young inexperienced man.

A similarly themed story, first told in the days following Feith’s death by his close friend, Hardoyo, took on something like mythic dimensions in the flow of “remembering” and testimony that followed. In the 1950s, Hardoyo was leader of the communist-affiliated youth group CGMI (Indonesian Student Movement Center), and was arrested and detained under the New Order regime for thirteen years. The two men had known each other in the early 1960s as they moved about what was then a smaller Jakarta and in and out of its various political circles. It was not until Hardoyo’s
release from prison in 1979, however, that the pair formed a strong friendship. The week before Feith died, he was in Indonesia, visited Yogyakarta, and stayed for a few nights at Hardoyo’s simple home in southeast Jakarta. An ex-political prisoner, tarred with the communist brush and thus treated as a pariah under the New Order, Hardoyo remembered with affection Feith’s explanation for accepting his offer to stay as his guest and, in particular, his choice of transportation in Jakarta:

This time Herb deliberately came and went from and to Lenteng Agung by the Jabotabek train to Cikini, which is crowded with small traders. His reason [...] “…jammed in there amongst the wong cilik I truly longed for the atmosphere of Jakarta in the 1950s.”

Feith’s nostalgia for a Jakarta of fifty years ago speaks to his long relationship with the place. Indonesians responded to this but, more important, they responded to his connection with common people who are simply coping with the rigours of their everyday lives.

**Conclusion**

The challenge for the biographer is to accommodate as many voices, views, and truths about a life as possible, including those of the subject. Herb Feith was not a polarising character. My informants, without exception, recounted their respect and affection for him. There are no great chasms in fact in the chronicle of his life’s activities or even of his motives. The “content” of the many histories of Herb Feith told to me rang in harmony. The discord was found in the forms, the tone, the interpretations. He may not be polarising, but he is a paradox. This tonal discord between Australian and Indonesian “tellings” of the life of Herb Feith centres around his many contradictions as an individual. As much as they lauded and loved him, my Australian informants were often puzzled, frustrated, and disappointed by Feith. Perhaps it was his chicken-eating vegetarianism, his unwillingness or incapacity to write and share his
important knowledge of Indonesia when it was most needed, his unkempt physical presentation at official and public occasions, or his fluid, though sometimes dogmatic, religiosity. For my Indonesian informants, these apparent contradictions were seen very differently. They were understood as expressions of human frailty and strength of self, of courage in his commitment to an ideal, and as the selflessness of a person deeply connected with himself and with others, all of which amounted to a person of great power.

Herb Feith was in many ways a deeply self-reflective man. A close friend and one-time psychiatrist of Feith’s remarked that he had an innate psychiatric awareness without ever having studied the theories of Freud or others. Feith’s ability to cross boundaries and make connections with Indonesians, and indeed with most people he met, were innate and not learned skills, but he nevertheless recognised the importance of employing them when they were needed. From his earliest experiences as a child refugee in a Melbourne schoolyard, and later as a foreigner employed in Indonesia’s post-revolutionary government, Feith perfected the skill of crossing in and out of cultures. He came to be what his family described as an “international humanitarian.” Feith himself explained:

> Being an Indonesia person has been a very central part of my identity all of my life, but I found myself up against some puzzling things as I tried to work out what impact Indonesia’s really had on me and I think I’ve come close to admitting to myself that it’s been basically a fairly superficial impact, because I think I’m basically very much the same kind of person now as I was in my late teens. 49

The Indonesian poet, novelist, and former political prisoner, Hersri Setiawan wrote a poem to commemorate Herb Feith in the days immediately following his death.
Hersri Setiawan  
Kockengen, 19 November 2001

English translation by the author with Harry Aveling

When I showed the poem to Feith’s widow, Betty, she remarked on the sentimentality of Indonesians. Her comments reminded me of my early surprise at the different emotional response of my Indonesian and Australian informants. It was now clear to me that emotion and sentimentality are more than superficialities; rather, they are extremely important in understanding the ways people “tell” a life, a history. What I understood Betty Feith’s comment to mean was that Indonesians are not shy about expressing emotion, as those from a Western tradition often are. Another of Feith’s close friends confirmed this for me. Indeed, she explained that it was precisely this characteristic—Feith’s ready expression of emotion, particularly his concern and care—that made him special in Indonesia. His was an open and honest engagement, where other foreigners were, as the Indonesians saw it, guarded and non-emotive. This, as much as his
deep and long knowledge of Indonesia, his sympathetic physicality, and open, syncretic spirituality, combined to enable him to cross into this culture to such an extent that he could be described as representative of it.

Feith’s final trip to Indonesia had been largely spent in consultation with colleagues at Gadjah Mada University’s Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies, which he had helped to establish, and where he had taught in the early 1990s. Feith hoped to permanently divide his time between teaching in Yogyakarta and living in Melbourne. Indeed, he would have preferred a complete and permanent shift to Indonesia, where he felt useful and felt at home, but his wife longed to be close to her children and grandchildren. At this, the end of his life, Herb Feith lived within a transnational space. The irony is that the “national” is emphasized in the ways my informants remembered Feith after his death. Unlike Feith himself, for whom boundaries between inside and outside were meaningless, and identity labels equally so, such distinctions remain embedded in the narrative of his life told by others.
Notes

2. Ibid.
11. A number of obituaries for Herb Feith were published in Australia’s major national dailies, and a special In Memoriam program dedicated to him on Radio National’s Asia Pacific program. Over a year later, Radio National’s Encounter program ran a special tribute also.


Romano, *Politics and the Press*, 143


Winichakul, “Writing at the Interstices.”

Interviewing my informants less than five years after his death meant that the clichéd admonition “to not speak ill of the dead” was a constant and concerning one.


Pierre Hutton, *After the Heroic Age and before Australia’s Rediscovery of Southeast Asia* (Brisbane: Griffith University, Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, 1997).


Feith’s family believes that he was banned from entering Indonesia from around 1972-1977. For an example of his work from this time see *Asia’s Flashpoint, 1971: Bangla Desh* (Bedford Park: Flinders University of South Australia, 1971).

Though pressures on academics to “publish or perish” were arguably less acute in the 1970s, my informants, whose responses were recorded in 2005-2006, undoubtedly view Feith’s reduced productivity within a contemporary context which places great emphasis on institutionalized qualifiers and quantifiers of “knowledge.”

Vedi R. Hadiz and Daniel Dhakidae, eds., *Social Science and Power in Indonesia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 1.


This power was recognised by the government of Indonesia also, to the extent that, according to Feith himself, and his colleague Benedict Anderson, it placed Feith on the banned list from 1972-1977. (See Benedict R.O’G Anderson, “Scholarship on Indonesia and Raison d’Etat: Personal Experience,” *Indonesia*, Vol.62. (October 1996), 8.

Bill Armstrong, interview with author, Melbourne, 8 June 2005.


Noelle Nicholls, in interview with author, Ballarat, 23 March 2005.

47 Bondan Winarno, “Professor Herb Feith Naik Sepeda Menghadap Al Khalik,” *Suara Pembaruan*,
http://www.suarapembaruan.com/News/2001/11/16/Utama/ut03.html,

48 Hardoyo, email message to Indonesia-interest group e-list, 30 November 2001.