

## IN MEMORIAM

Harry Jindrich Benda, 1919–1971

The world community of 'Southeast Asian' historians suffered a most grievous loss with the sudden death of Professor Harry J. Benda. He was only in middle life, and was moreover in the full tide of his career. We have been robbed of a most distinguished scholar and treasured friend.

Of his early years we have no account except the fact that he was born in 1919 in Czechoslovakia and that at the age of nineteen he went to Indonesia where he found employment in a business firm. This was a life of unintellectual drudgery in, as he put it, "... the world of shipping documents, letters of credit, and foreign exchange regulations, the world of the Chinese *tauke* and Dutch hotel managers ...". On one occasion, attending a lecture at Batavia's Alliance Francaise, he became acquainted with the late Louis Damais, the well-known scholar of Indonesian archaeology. They gradually developed a bond which was never interrupted. With Damais's fostering care and rich and instructive conversation Benda could satisfy his irrepressible thirst for knowledge. He familiarised himself with French literature, the Dutch language and *Bahasa Indonesia*. It was while sitting at the feet of this great scholar that Benda became interested in Indonesian society and culture. This association with Damais seems to have laid the foundation for his future work. Even the internment-camps of the Japanese could not sever the close tie with Damais who every now and then sent him money and news concerning the course of the war.

In one of the internment-camps Benda gained the notice and friendship of Professor Wertheim who encouraged him to devote himself to scholarship. During the long days in the camp Benda benefited from many conversations with him. This period must be viewed as a turning point in his life.

As soon as the war was over Benda went to New Zealand where he entered Victoria University College and was conferred a B.A. degree in 1950. He then read for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of New Zealand and graduated in 1952. Thanks to an opportunity which occurred at this juncture, he went to the United States, and pursued Government and Far Eastern Studies at Cornell University, obtaining his PhD in 1954. He was appointed Assistant Professor of History at the University of Rochester from 1955 until 1959. This was the year in which he assumed his professorship at Yale University and began to give the courses on Indonesian and Southeast Asian history by which he was to become so highly regarded.

I can safely say, as a student of Indonesian and Southeast Asian history that Benda excelled his contemporaries in the field. His intellectual equipment was remarkable and his writings are a wealth of fresh and original ideas bearing eloquent testimony to his scholarly insight. He made his *debut* with his dissertation on the history of Indonesian Islam under the Japanese occupation, entitled *The Crescent and the Rising Sun*. This is the first systematic study of this important episode to appear. It was a notable achievement, lucidly organized and written, showing a confident grasp of the subject. He displayed a remarkable power of analysis of the major issues of Japanese politics the Japanese were entangled with in confronting the Muslim population of Indonesia.

His later studies, consisting of subsequent books, source publications, and numerous articles in various journals, e.g. the *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, are likewise evidence of his analytical power. His

article on the structure of Southeast Asian History in the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* (Vol. 3, no. 1, 1963) may be taken as a research design for the study of Southeast Asian history. He says in this article that the structural approach should commence with the endeavour to discover or reconstruct a set of social, economic, and political relationships. His contention is that this approach is most conducive to bringing out the infrastructure and internal processes of Southeast Asian societies in the past. An important contribution which he made in this direction was the book entitled *A History of Modern Southeast Asia*, a joint effort with John Bastin. He put emphasis on internal developments within the indigenous societies. Unlike previous historians of Indonesian or Southeast Asian history Benda was not concerned with chronological history. His effort to study the history of the area from within is also represented in his work of selected historical readings, *The World of Southeast Asia*. In compiling this book he focused on the activities of Southeast Asians as main agents in Southeast Asian history. Here is another effort to get away from the Europe-centric view. The limits of this article will not permit a detailed discussion of all his writings. Suffice it to say that Benda has greatly enriched the literature on Indonesian and Southeast Asian history by bringing to it some new and exciting points of view and approaches. His works have increasingly shown that he was a pioneer in moulding the historian's conception of Southeast Asia.

It would be a mistake to think of Benda as being interested only in producing books and articles. Besides writing Benda bore various other duties. He was, for many years, a representative of the Dutch Royal Institute of Anthropology and Linguistics in the United States; he was connected in a number of ways to several Journals, e.g. the *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, and to learned societies. He was deeply concerned for the promotion of Southeast Asian studies.

As a result of his own long-standing interest in Southeast Asian history Benda was a supporter of research activities in Southeast Asia. His ardour was demonstrated in his work as the first Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore (June 1968–August 1969). It was Benda's intention that this Institute should become a regional research centre where scholars from the region could conduct research on Southeast Asia with prime emphasis on modern history and social science subjects. During the period he held the office of Director he devoted himself wholeheartedly to the Institute's affairs. Anxious to get it off on a good footing, in the original campaign for recruiting fellowships he contacted friends and former students asking them to join the Institute. Within a year he was able to establish the Institute, the importance of which we are realizing now.

His paper, written as Director, which he read at a seminar at Nanyang University in August 1969, indicated his grasp of the problems involved in the setting up of the Institute. He saw clearly that the development of such a 'regional think-tank', as he put it, should be based on broad comprehensive lines and should try not only to take into account the needs and interests of Southeast Asian scholars but seek to break down their parochial outlook. I cannot resist quoting from his paper the following: "Though we neither can nor wish to deflect scholars from their perfectly legitimate intellectual concerns with their own country's affairs, we can provide them with the appropriate environment and the appropriate company to help widen their horizons, thus permitting them to assimilate knowledge about other parts of the region by the slow process of gradual learning and scholarly osmosis."

My first remembrance of Benda dates back to the occasion when I attended the first International Conference of Southeast Asian historians held in 1961 at Singapore. It was my first meeting with scholars whom I had known by reputa-

tion as "Southeast Asian historians".

Since then Benda had been most helpful to me, providing introductions and opening up channels of communication which, without him, might never have been opened, or would have taken much longer. More important, from our first meeting in Singapore I have felt in him the stimulus one scholar can derive from another.

He represented that combination, all too rarely found in the university, of a fine scholar and a superb teacher. In seminars, in the discussion of a stiff amount of assigned work Benda would range over a considerable number of books assuming that every student knew them. As a result they had to spend many hours catching up with the literature and this meant hard work. But working with him was stimulating. When I was a graduate student at Yale, I took the opportunity to attend some of his lectures and thereby came to appreciate something not only of the penetrative explanation but also the vivid personality which made his courses a source of inspiration. What he conveyed to us was not orthodox political history but a "new history" with an awareness of a conceptual framework and a question-posing approach.

My interest in "Peasant Movements" was aroused in a seminar on the peasantry in Southeast Asia conducted by Professor Benda at Yale. It was as a student under his direction that I decided to pursue the history of the peasantry in Indonesia which bore fruit in my dissertation, published under the title *Peasants' Revolt in Banten in 1888* (1966). I later attempted to place this kind of movement in a framework of an Indonesia-centric history of Indonesia as a structural, or if you will, a comparative history. This led to my decision to embark on a comparative study of protest movements in rural Java. The start of this work was made possible by the kind offer of a fellowship made to me by Professor Benda when he was Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. I have been fortunate in that I was able not only to conduct further research in the field of social history but to study with Benda once more.

As a teacher Benda succeeded in inspiring a considerable number of students to do research. He did his duties with zeal and did not spare himself. He gave devoted attention not only to the academic work of students but also to their personal problems. His students could not fail to appreciate his intense and genuine interest in them. He was also the warmest and truest of friends. He delighted in having friends in his house. I remember with a warm sense of pleasure and gratitude those lovely evenings in his house when the lighter side of things on Indonesia were discussed. His conversation had a certain spice of worldly observation and the touch of humour born of wide experience and self-criticism. His humanity, devotion and desire to help others were plain to all who came into contact with him.

His interest in historical studies was as keen as ever the last time I met him, the summer of 1971. He was thinking of better ways and means of attracting students from Southeast Asia to come to the United States to study history. When he drove me to New Haven airport where he had welcomed me five days before, he was discussing the need for a concrete programme of post-graduate work in history especially designed for Indonesian university lecturers. Furthermore, he expressed his willingness to support a project for the rewriting of Indonesian history.

Late in the fall he had a severe heart attack. He was taken to hospital where he recovered and returned to his home in Hamden, much better to all appearances. He looked forward to taking up his teaching duties again. But, alas, this was not to be.

We have lost one of the most dynamic personalities among the present

generation of “Southeast Asian” historians. His gifts of humanity and scholarship will keep evergreen the memory of him.

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