

Memories of Ben Anderson  
by Tamara Loos

Ben Anderson Memorial Service, 31 Jan. 2016.

My name is Tamara Loos, and I speak to you today in my capacity as one of Ben's mentees. I had the privilege of having Ben as a teacher when I was a graduate student at Cornell, and as a colleague in the Southeast Asia Program—I've known him for over twenty years.

In the wake of his passing, I have heard so many of us express deep, abiding respect for Ben and a profound sense of loss. However, I have also learned through these conversations, that so few really felt close to Ben or knew how Ben felt about us.

Ben was formal, maybe not in the way he dressed, but in his interpersonal relationships. He would never express directly his care for you or his praise. But I've been thinking about this: here he was, a world-renowned scholar who could have taught anywhere, lived anywhere. He travelled to Jakarta or Bangkok or Manila and would return again and again to Freeville, to the Southeast Asia Program, and to us, his community, his family. He was devoted to us here, committed to our work on SEA. Ben expressed his affection and his respect in this and many other meaningful ways.

I'll give a couple of examples. Ben helped establish the journal, *Indonesia*, in 1966. In 2008, when Ben and Jim Siegel decided to retire from the journal's editorship, they selected Professors Eric Tagliacozzo and Josh Barker to replace them. Did Ben say to Eric and Josh: "good job! We think you're the best scholars imaginable to edit this journal for all the amazing scholarship you've written about Indonesia!"? No. Ben was complex socially and interpersonally. He revealed he cared in many other ways though. Like asking you to shepherd his literal brainchild.

Ben honored me by asking me, (again indirectly<sup>1</sup>), to write the introduction to his

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<sup>1</sup> He suggested my name to Deborah Homsher, who was then managing editor of the Southeast Asia

outstanding, field-changing collection of articles about Thailand--articles that he had written over a forty-year period and that I, as a Thailand scholar, was raised on. He gave no instructions, no guidance, no rules about what I could and could not say. So, I wrote the piece with great enthusiasm and just as much trepidation. When I gave him the final draft, which did include some personal details about the shift I saw in the gender, sexuality, and forms of political expression of his Thai intellectual comrades, I admit I was anxious that I may have crossed a line. His response: “you spelled *fowl* wrong.” He corrected my spelling errors.

My point: Ben’s friendship was expressed in many *uncommon* ways, and his mentorship was freeing. Ben did not dictate or interfere with your scholarship or ideas—he didn’t need to mark it, to make it his, even when the projects (like an essay about his life as it related to his scholarship on Thailand, or his baby, the journal *Indonesia*) were of profound personal significance to him. Instead he simply set you up, pushed you forward, and said *explore*.

Exploring is something Ben did in his life with gusto. Ben expressed this in an email he wrote in 2012 in response to my description of a torrential thunderstorm whipping past me in my high-rise Bangkok apartment. His response:

“I envy you - I really love the rydu fõn [Thai: rainy season] seen from 9 floors up, flash lightning, exhilarating downpours. I have fond memories of rydu fon in Jakarta in the early 60s. In the slums, like energetic young cockroaches, the kids would pour out of their hovels, all stark naked, including even little girls, loving the warm rain, the freshened air, and looking for a few pennies from bourgeois cars stuck in small flooded streets – [the kids] pretending to help push these cars into drier places. It is what the

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Program Publications, which published Ben’s collection of essays on Thailand. He said he didn’t want to write it because these kinds of introductions (by the author of the essay collection) tending to be too self-adoring or something along those lines. See Loos, “Life Commitments: Benedict Anderson’s Scholarship on Thailand,” in Benedict R. O’G. Anderson’s *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* (Ithaca: Cornell SEA Publications, 2014), 1-26. Published by *Aan Journal* as

“พันธกิจแห่งชีวิต: งานวิชาการด้านเมืองไทยของเบ็น แอนเดอร์สัน.”

French call 'jouissance.' Mad ecstasy against the dull ruts of everyday life.'<sup>2</sup>

For Ben, a small bite out of life would not suffice. He experienced what life offered via *all* his senses, not just his intellect. Life was sensuous, textured, tactile, vibrant.

I'll end now by sharing the last time I saw Ben. In late October (2015), just before he flew to Bangkok, I drove to Freeville to give him an official letter for his multiple re-entry visa that would bring him from Bangkok to Java. I knocked. No one answered. I tucked the letter into his old farm house's broken screen door, and ran to the warmth of my car, but heard at the last second him call out my name. He held the letter, but wanted a proper goodbye. I ran back, gave him a big hug and a kiss on his rough unshaven cheek, half smoked cigar hanging out the other side. He chuckled, warm and gravelly. I can't imagine a better way to send him off, and to be sent off by him.

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<sup>2</sup> Personal email, 18 July 2012.