

Herb Feith Lecture

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**Divisive Modernity: Thoughts on
Southeast Asian History**

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Introduction

When John Legge asked me to give this lecture in honour of Herb Feith, I told him Herb had many friends who knew him better than I did. There were many scholars who specialised in Indonesia and had worked with him for years. John Legge himself would have been an ideal person to give this lecture and many others I can think of. For a number of reasons put to me in his usual persuasive way, John brought me closer to Herb than I had been in real life. I then thought of the last conversation that John and I had with Herb on the afternoon of the day when he had his tragic accident. Most of all, I recall the discussions that he and I were engaged in before we parted. At least in part because I was reminded of the hours we had together, I agreed to accept the invitation and will try to do justice to some of the matters that were of concern to Herb and of deep interest to me.

That, however, was not the only reason why I have chosen to talk about divisive modernity tonight. It had to do with a conversation I recall having with him the first time we met some forty years ago. Herb and I did not meet often during those years. The memorable afternoon we had together on November 15, 2001 was the first time that I had seen Herb in more than ten years. We met only a few times, mostly when I came to Melbourne. It is a measure of the kind of man Herb was that those few times have left such a deep impression in me, so much so that I think of him as a dear friend, someone I could exchange deeply felt ideas and experiences with.

Divided Visions

The subject that ties together some of our meetings were all connected with our common interest in modernisation, the process that would bring our societies from a

backward to a progressive condition. We first met as young men excited by the way Southeast Asian leaders chose their political and economic policies to attain modernity for their countries. They seemed to have assumed that modernity was a simple unifying force. It seemed absolutely clear goal that modernity could be achieved through a body of more or less integrated ideas and institutions. They expected that a state built on modern principles would bring unity and prosperity to their peoples. Few anticipated how that modernity could lead to new kinds of divisions unknown to earlier societies and cultures. We know better now, but I am intrigued that this was a topic that came up in the first and last meetings I had with Herb.

The first time we met was in the winter of 1965, when I visited the young Monash University at Clayton. John Legge had introduced us when I called on the newly founded Monash Centre of Southeast Asian Studies that was already seen as a centre that would one day match the famous one at Cornell University. Herb was himself one of Cornell's finest and best-known products. John and others had also been there and believed that Australia must have such of a centre of its own, not merely another Cornell but one that would eventually be a centre for the region as well.

For me, coming then from the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur at the time when Malaysia had just been established, meeting Herb was an unforgettable experience. I was keen to tell him how the new federation was being challenged, not only from without by Indonesia's konfrontasi campaign that had tried so hard to stop it from being born, but also from within by the divided visions of what a modern state and society should be like. All the confrontations were couched in the language of modernity. What is more, all the protagonists at the time were self-proclaimed modernisers who wanted to be modern so that their countries would one day match those in the West. What saddened me was that their disagreements made them ready go to such great lengths to destroy something that could have been a first step towards that goal.

The new Federation of Malaysia was seriously threatened by President Soekarno's konfrontasi. We talked about how to interpret Soekarno's motives and intentions. Of course, what Herb had written about the limitations of constitutional democracy formed part of the explanation. It had produced the kind of guided democracy that allowed Soekarno to proclaim, without challenge within Indonesia, that Malaysia was nothing more than a creature of neo-colonialism. Thus, he could portray Malaysia as a something that Britain and the United States had created to retain their dominance in the Malay world. Soekarno had no sympathy with the idea that legitimate interests were involved among the elites in the several component parts of the former British territories. He considered himself to have been the only true moderniser in the region and that he was fighting the old forces standing in the way of modernity. In turn, the Malaysian leaders clearly saw the federation as a step forward towards a stronger and more viable modern state. And they were determined to reach that goal, even if it meant burying their pride and seeking help from the British officials who had been so patronising in the past about their ability to build a nation on their own.

That was not all. Another kind of divided modernity had also begun to unfold within the new country within months of the Malaysian Federation being established. This was a division that was taking place among the very leaders who had fought hard for the federation to be created. It was between those at the centre who held the reins of power in Kuala Lumpur and those on the periphery led by some of the leaders in Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah. Of course, there were vested interests and strong personalities behind the confrontations and the divisions could not easily be explained. But underlying that battle was a divided vision of modernity. On one side was a reading of the idea of a nation-state. On the other side was a less well-defined idea of a plural society that could be the basis of a multi-communal state. For this latter group, their ideal of the federation was one that was multi-cultural, with multiple languages, religions and other traditions that were given considerable autonomy within the state. Even as we were speaking that July in 1965, the division within the federation was heading towards dangerous communal tensions. No

resolution was possible. It had to be either the nation-state following the model of the old Western European states or the kinds of civil war that destroyed the unity of Cyprus, Palestine and British India (to name the most obvious examples). Within weeks, Tunku Abdul Rahman would take the drastic step of breaking up the Federation of Malaysia altogether by expelling Singapore. We certainly did not expect that fervent claims to modernity could lead to such a drastic division. It was my first direct taste of the divisiveness that was embedded in the ideals about becoming modern.

Although at our subsequent meetings, Herb and I did not talk about those divisions again, we did note that the divisions did end up surprisingly well for Singapore and not at all badly for the ruling elites of Malaysia. It looked like a case of “divided we stand”. Many of us who supported the creation of the original Federation had thought at the time that the country would have a better future had it stayed united. But we have had to admit that continuous divisions in the name of two kinds of modernity could produce tragic results. It would appear that, when visions of modernity are divided as much as that, then enforced unity might not have stood but could have speeded up a fall.

We did not refer to these matters when we met in November 2001, 36 years after we first met, but we could well have noted that yet another set of divided visions had been played out in Malaysian politics during the past decade. This time the division came from pressures for change inside the country, aggravated by divisions introduced from Iran and parts of the Arab world. This began as a struggle for the soul of Islam as the national religion between the government party of Prime Minister Mahathir and the leader of the Muslim Opposition. Of course, this division has a different focus. The established religion of the majority Malays has been used by Dr Mahathir to return to the old refrain of contrasting his modernity with the opposition’s backwardness, both essentialised as absolutes. In turn, the opposition leaders under Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat would claim that the moral Islam that cared for the weak and the poor would be closer to the modern ideal of the liberal welfare state than the corrupt state-centred system developed in Malaysia that Dr Mahathir

favoured. We have seen such contestations before arising from divided visions of modernity. It is really not a question of determining who is modern and who is not or even who is more modern. What is significant is that different methods are now being used by Malay leaders to try to achieve the modernity they desire and also to decide whom that modernity should best serve. What is of particular concern is how free the people should be to choose between the claims to modernity that divide their leaders.

Young Activism

When I came to live in Australia, I began to appreciate the significance of Herb's pioneering work as Australia's first volunteer abroad in Indonesia, and of the way he initiated what was to become Australian Volunteers International. In this way, he helped to establish the Australian tradition of volunteer youth, particularly in Indonesia, a tradition that is still alive and well, and a testament of his influence outside the academic world. Indeed, I was always conscious that he was no mere academic who was content only to deal with the world of ideas and knowledge. He had another world and was prepared, when away from his students and his classes, to devote a great deal of his time and immense energy to work for a network of civil society groups on issues of poverty and injustice, especially with groups in Indonesia and Australia. He was clearly committed to doing what he could for the young people in both Australia and Indonesia who sought knowledge and understanding at all levels of society. For that, he was someone who was not only admired by his peers but by all who came in contact with him, someone who was deeply involved with the human condition.

The many groups of people in Australia and Indonesia who know his work well have recorded their appreciation in various memorial meetings after his death and have made many statements about the range and depth of his feelings for people. I shall quote only one of them. This is what John Legge said,

"He was a great teacher, almost in a religious sense, attracting a devoted band of followers.... As a teacher and an academic, he was inspirational...."

My friend, Jamie Mackie, who also knew that part of Herb well and had shared some of that commitment with Herb when they were both very young, was kind enough to

share some of his experiences with me. He filled in the bits of Herb's life before I knew him, adding another dimension to my understanding of the young activist. Jamie wrote of his concern that young Australians today may not be as inspired to do the kind of creative things that Herb had done half a century ago. He underlined the point that Herb was creative and always sought to find new ways to see reality and propel his students to change and improve it. What Jamie and John's said has given a perspective to the last conversation that Herb and I had on his last day and has encouraged me to pursue some aspects for the theme of my talk tonight. I shall therefore use two key words in what John and Jamie had said - "creative" and "religious" - for the second and third part of my talk and use them to help me offer this as my personal tribute to Herb.

Let me begin with some of Herb's own words. I have taken these from the dialogue he had with Professor Bill Liddle of Ohio State University a few days before he died. Bill generously shared the dialogue with us by letting "Inside Indonesia" publish it. The words are part of a discussion of a larger subject about President Bush's policy against terrorism. I shall quote Herb totally out of context here, simply taking a few words that will help lead me to another part of my talk. I am sure Bill would not mind if I did not get into the debates about current American foreign policy. These are the words that I shall use as my text:

(quote) "...My preoccupation, for which I found quite a bit of sympathy in Indonesia - I got back from there on Friday after four weeks teaching at Gadja Mada and a week in Jakarta - is with fashioning mendayung antara dua karang [steering between two rocks] strategies..."

In the context of my theme of divisive modernity, this wish to fashion a set of strategies to be drawn from the Indonesian saying, mendayung antara dua karang [steering between two rocks], strikes me as particularly relevant.

My earlier example of the divisions that led to the break-up of Malaysia should dispose of any thought that modernity might be absolute and therefore indivisible. The traditional nation-state and the globalised multi-cultural society (or the even more complex entity, the multi-national state) are indeed two hard places, and there is no

comfort in being caught between the two. But it could become even more complicated. We know of the work done by the numerous NGO's that have been established in the region during the past two decades. Like the young activists at Gadjadara University, a new generation of men and women all over Southeast Asia have learnt to adapt to the globalising world and use the opportunities given them to obtain a measure of inner autonomy within various repressive state structures, notably that of President Suharto during his last years. This is not to say, as some idealists are wont to do, that the end of the nation-state is nigh. But the trends of the past few years, with greater liberalisation all round in Indonesia and elsewhere in the region, suggest that we will not all end up with newer versions of the narrow and exclusive nation-state. The young activist groups in Indonesia, for example, are showing how determined they are to survive the stresses and strains of the new democratising forces. They seem clear that they need to connect their revived country with the rest of the world more creatively than ever before.

This strikes me as the kind of division that will challenge our region for a long time to come. On one side is the ideal of an integrated monolithic state that combines its power with a self-conscious unifying tradition, in short, a stronger version of the classic nation-state. On the other is the interdependent elitist world that is being networked together by scientific knowledge, economics and technology and bolstered by transnational and regional institutions. This globalisation will make greater demands on all national governments. In response, the nation-states on their side will each tend to become more defensive and try to fight back.

This will make it likely that, from both sides, the world will become more critical of the kind of young activism that has built up so many NGO's in Indonesia. They too will be pressured to take sides and they will have to be more creative and try ever harder to maintain their autonomy should the divisions harden. The search for strategies to steer between two hard rocks seems appropriate for the divided modernities within the various NGO movements, especially the divisions that have come from alternative Islamic and Christian interpretations of modernity. Equally dangerous is the global struggle that has been given the name of "the war on

terrorism”. This struggle has been depicted as one between the forces of light and those of darkness, or between modernity and the Dark Ages. The young Indonesians may not all see it that way. For most of them, it is more a division between those in the West who believe that theirs is the light and those in various parts of Asia, and not least in Indonesia, who are still struggling among themselves to determine where the light is or even where to look. They would see that both sides are often the products of self-righteous modernising forces of the 20th century. Thus two hard places are being shaped by the power available. On one side now are overwhelming political and economic resources represented by the United States and its allies. On the other are claims of an alternative modernity that seem to depend on the asymmetric use of inexhaustible human sacrifices. Whether modern or not, both are the products of the modernising forces that have created new kinds of divisiveness among us.

The secular divide

This brings me to the word “religious” that came up in the second part of the last conversation Herb and I had in Monash that November afternoon. After talking for a while about his students in Jogjakarta, he quite unexpectedly asked me what I thought of the Falonggong in China. His interest surprised me. For one thing, I don’t remember us talking about events in China all the time we had ever talked. The topic interested him because of his deep concern for freedom and rights, in particular, the freedom to believe and practise one’s faith. Neither of us knew enough about the subject to pursue the discussion very far. But his question intrigued me and drove me to think about another division in the modernity that so many of us want for our societies. I refer to the division between secularism and the world of religion.

From my own study of Chinese history, I have come to the view that most Chinese people have an approach towards spiritual faith somewhat different from other peoples. Their view is one that places far greater emphasis on this world than the next. Indeed, they have arranged their religious ideas and practices in such a way that these are primarily directed to serve the people in this world. Rightly or wrongly, the idea of religion is not seen as an intense experience that commits someone to absolute truths or passionate causes, least of all to efforts to determine the best way to

get to the next world. When this worldly attitude towards the next life is placed in the context of modernisation, it does not really help them to understand the idea of secularism, especially the kind of secularism that emerged as one of the central concepts of the Western European experience.

My own reading of European Renaissance and Reformation history has given me a definition of secularisation that emphasises the bitter struggle between Church and State and the need for the modern state to be free from Church interference. I realise that there are many versions of this separation and some countries are more overtly ideological about this topic than others. All the same, this idea of secularism has been depicted as one of the critical preconditions of modernity in the West. It is seen as having played an important role in shaping the essence of that modernity that the rest of the world now wants. On reflection, this process could be seen as one that had set out to stop the bloody divisions between religions and then between State and Church only to create new divisions between the secular and the religious.

This background to what was a painful process of secularisation in Europe is hard to fit into the history of the relationship between religion and worldly authority in Asia, and this is especially so for China. Thus when Herb asked me about the Falonggong as a religious faith, I was hard put to explain what I understood it to be. There has never been a clear separation of Church and State in China largely because the Chinese did not have the equivalent of what the West called the Church. Unless we say that what was worldly in China was the same as the secular in the West, it is hard to draw clear comparisons. For most Chinese, the Falonggong developed out of certain social needs and drew on earlier spiritual and physical practices that its followers believed could help them restore their sense of morality and hope. Indeed, it first manifested itself as modern versions of particular qigong breathing exercises that groups of people would practise together. This had satisfied the needs of people who had lived under great stress and wanted to prepare themselves to face new tests of endurance, including a range of challenges that included ill health and ageing.

As the numbers of practitioners grew, controversies began about some of the claims of the Falonggong leaders that touched on their transcendental powers and

how their teachings might prepare their followers for another world. In the eyes of some, this was taking the movement into the religious realm. At this point came what was seen as a show of social or even political power outside the Chinese leaders' central offices. What followed has become very controversial within China. The central leadership ordered a national crackdown on the organization. The political leaders were not unanimous about the decision and it was certainly not a popular one. But once the crackdown had begun, it created fresh divisions within Chinese society that have highlighted the question of China's secularism and national policies towards all religions.

The freedom to choose one's religion today could be regarded as one of the great freedoms that modernity seems to offer. A country's policy towards religion could be a marker of the kind of secularism that empathised with a people's spiritual needs. However, China's socialist ideals were couched in terms of an absolute scientism. The generation of revolutionaries that captured power in 1949 had espoused the view that only science could save China from the kind of superstitious faith that had led to the country's failure to modernise on its own. They believed that a scientific ideology was the answer. It was their responsibility to end all superstitious beliefs and practices so that the country could become vital and progressive. This looked like a kind of fundamentalist worldliness. It certainly made it difficult for the Communist Party to deal with anything that was deeply spiritual, particularly ideas about salvation and the next world.

This is not the place to deal with Chinese religious attitudes, but I am reminded of the strategies needed to steer between two hard places. The Chinese government saw the Falonggong as representing the dark forces of the past by insisting that it would resist the lights of a communist future. But it could be seen instead as one of the divisions within modernity, a reminder to us how the modern can be divisive in dangerous ways. Here I shall simply end with the divisiveness of absolute secularism. The kind of secularism that emerged in Europe brought harmony between powerful religions that still have deep appeal to millions of followers. It is a secularism that stresses freedom and respect for the rights of those who believe in different faiths. But

that is the soft version that may characterise a soft modernity. The hard version of modernity however, uses the quest for scientific truth to reject anything that cannot be proven through reason, logic and experiment. It could produce an extremism that does not tolerate religious faith and threaten the spiritual life that people need. Should that happen, hardened positions would arise to threaten the harmony that secular modernity is supposed to create.

Conclusion

Whether modernity is divisive or not is a question that reminds us how philosophers have been debating issues of the absolute and indivisible for a long while. People like Isaiah Berlin tell us that there are some values that everyone should acknowledge as absolute. I am persuaded that it is legitimate to proclaim that certain values like human rights, freedom, equality, love of peace, and the need to believe in one's own faith (to take a few examples) could be seen as absolute. This does not mean that they constitute the core of any definition of modernity. Even if they were key parts of any criteria of modernity, that would not make modernity itself absolute and indivisible. On the contrary, values that are absolute would have always been true and would therefore strictly speaking have nothing to do with being modern. At most, we can say that modernity has made it easier for some of these values to be realised and sustained. But it can also be demonstrated that the achievements of modern science and technology could also make us less free and equal, and even less peaceable.

Most Asians have always lived with both the worldly and the otherworldly and can go on living comfortably with them both. They have been fortunate that, with a plethora of religions that they have, there has never been a powerful Church for any of them that they would have to struggle to secularise. It seems to me a mistake to think of religions in Asia in that secularisation framework and allow a kind of absolute modernity to emerge. Let me end by coming back to Herb's question about religion in China. I think he would sympathise with efforts to steer between the hard rocks of dogmatic versions of modernity. He would have agreed that it would be foolish of us to allow any such absolute notions to dominate our lives today.

