In Memoriam Thee Kian Wie

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On Saturday 8 February 2014, Dr Thee Kian Wie, honorary member (erelid) of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV), passed away in Jakarta after a brief illness at the age of 78 years. Both his funeral service on the following Monday and the preceding memorial service organized by his employer, Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIPI, Indonesian Institute of Sciences), attracted a great deal of attention in Indonesia, and obituaries were quick to appear in the Indonesian press (Kompas, 9 February 2014). Pak Thee, as he was affectionately known by his many friends, is survived by his widow, Tjoe Tan, their son, Marcel Thee, and one granddaughter.

Thee Kian Wie was born in Jakarta on 20 April 1935 as the eldest son of a school teacher. At the time of the Japanese invasion, he was a pupil at the European primary school in then Batavia. He witnessed the Japanese occupation of Indonesia as a child in Jakarta and continued to secondary school after independence. He was a student at the newly founded Faculty of Economics at the Universitas Indonesia in Jakarta, then headed by the venerable Indonesian economist Sumitro Djojohadikusumo, and which counted several Dutch professors among the teaching staff (Weber and Schulte Nordholt 2010:9–10, 13–14). Thee Kian Wie obtained his degree as a doctorandus in 1959, and soon acquired a position as an administrative officer at Majelis Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (MIPI, Indonesian Council for the Sciences, the predecessor of LIPI). In 1963 he left for the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where he studied first for a master’s degree in economics and then for a PhD. In 1969 he defended his PhD dissertation on the economic development of the plantation belt of North Sumatra during the late colonial period, a pioneering piece of work due to its successful application of economic theory to the modern economic history of Indonesia (Thee 1977).

Thee Kian Wie was the longest-serving staff member of LIPI ever. He had started to work as a junior researcher with the department LEKNAS-LIPI already prior to his departure for the United States. In 1974 he was appointed as an assistant director of the research department LEKNAS-LIPI and he served in
that capacity until 1978. In 1976 he became a senior research associate, a position which he continued to hold for more than three and a half decades. Between 1986 and 1990, he headed the newly designed department PEP-LIPI, focusing specifically on economic and development studies. In addition to heavy administrative and managerial tasks, he served as an occasional lecturer (dosen terbang) at the Universitas Sriwijaya in Palembang and as the head of several research projects concerning the economic development of Indonesia, including regional economic development in North Sumatra, foreign direct investment, and technology transfer in the Indonesian manufacturing sector. Over the years he became one of the best-known and most frequently cited members of the economic world in Indonesia. He retired formally from LIPI in 2000, but was seen coming into his office at LIPI only days before his death.

Thee Kian Wie was internationally oriented to an extraordinary degree. He was a visiting fellow with the Indonesia Project at the Australian National University in Canberra on four occasions: in 1982/83, 1990/91, 1997, and 2007. He was invited as a visiting fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) in Wassenaar in 1994/95. In addition, he spent short terms as a visiting research fellow with the International Centre for the Study of East Asian Development in Kitakyushu, Japan, in 2001; the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore in 2002; Griffith University in Brisbane in 2003; and the Tokyo office of the Asian Development Bank in 2005. He maintained a huge international network. It was said that if one stayed long enough in his tiny room at LIPI, sooner or later one would be guaranteed to meet anybody of significance in the world of Indonesian economics. He was famous for his extreme and unusual dependability in promptly answering letters, faxes, and e-mails. He was especially keen to help students, both Indonesian and foreign, who were at the point of beginning their work on the Indonesian economy and society. For generations of young Dutch scholars in particular, a consultation with Pak Thee was the first step in paving the path for successful research in Indonesia.

Thee Kian Wie was an exceptionally productive academic writer. When stock was recently taken of his international publications since 1972, the list of titles contained eight books, nine collective volumes, 17 scientific papers, 45 book chapters and 38 academic articles, all in English (Lindblad and Purwanto 2010:425–435). In addition, he authored a large number of articles in Indonesian journals and newspapers. Few scholars in Indonesia or elsewhere could match this impressive achievement.

Thee Kian Wie was repeatedly honoured for his contributions to the study of the Indonesian economy and its history. In celebration of his sixty-fifth birth-