Nurturing the Next Generation of Southeast Asia Specialists

By Margaret Scott

It was the height of the McCarty era, when John (“Jack”) Bresnan, booted out of the Foreign Service, turned his many talents to Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia. For more than 50 years, Bresnan has been a scholar and participant in Indonesia’s spectacular advances and retreats as the nation went from cold war battlefield to the world’s third largest democracy. Indonesia also holds the distinction of being the world’s largest Muslim nation, with more than 200 million believers.

Bresnan, 78, spent the first part of his career nurturing a generation of Indonesian social scientists, as the Ford Foundation’s first grants officer in Jakarta, representing many Foundations, including the Rockefeller and Ford foundations. Then in 1982 he moved to Columbia, where he trained the next generation of Southeast Asia scholars from his position as executive director of the Pacific Basin Studies Program at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute. While at Columbia, he also founded the Seminar on Southeast Asia in World Society, which has hosted prominent speakers from around the world who have contributed to our understanding of Southeast Asia.

Bresnan’s former students, colleagues, and friends gathered at Faculty House to celebrate his extraordinary career with a symposium entitled “Legacies of Change in Southeast Asia,” papers from which will be published as a festschrift, or celebration publication.

Hosted by the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, the event provided an opportunity to reflect on the issues and ideas that mark Bresnan’s contributions to the study of Southeast Asia. The day’s theme was a region transformed—by wars, hot and cold, by periods of high growth and high authoritarianism, and now by the challenges of reform, democratization, and the rise to power of the Indonesian middle class—alongside the ongoing challenges of reform, democratization, and now by the challenges of reform, democratization, and the rise to power of the Indonesian middle class—alongside the ongoing challenges of reform, democratization, and the rise to power of the Indonesian middle class—alongside the ongoing challenges of reform, democratization, and the rise to power of the Indonesian middle class. Indonesian social scientists have long been importan...