

**Professor Dr. Che Wan Ahmad Zawawi  
Ibrahim(1947-2022)\***

Memories by Victor T. King\*\*

Sadly, I had to write several obituaries in the past few years. I am of that generation that saw dearest friends and colleagues passing. We must record our memories of them, what they gave us, and the legacy they left. This one is a tribute to Professor Zawawi Ibrahim, simply known as “Wan,” a distinguished Malaysian scholar, socio-cultural activist, and musician. *Suvannabhumi* salutes him for supporting the development of the journal as a member of the editorial board, and for making significant contributions to increasing the international scholarly reputation of the Korea Institute for ASEAN Studies, Busan University of Foreign Studies (KIAS-BUFS). We extend our sincerest condolences to his family. My wife and I became close to his wife Noorshah Mohd Salleh during her frequent sojourns with Wan in Brunei, as well as his children Rendra, Hameer, and Kaiysha, all singer-songwriters like their father. As an accomplished musician, Wan composed many memorable songs, many of them recorded by such Malaysian popular singers as Datuk Ramli Sarip and M. Nasir.

This is one of the most difficult tributes to write. I first met

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Wan over 30 years ago in the 1990s. We have collaborated on many writing and editing projects, particularly during the last decade when we were at Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) together, he as Professor in Sociology and Anthropology and myself as Professor in the Institute of Asian Studies. I do not think I can match the obituary written by Emeritus Professor Dato' Abdul Rahman Embong published in *Aliran* on July 7, 2022, which lamented how the Malaysian social science community "lost a fine leading anthropologist, meticulous researcher, prolific author and teacher," and how the arts "lost a great talent with a creative mind who hailed from academia." Professor Abdul Rahman worked closely together with Wan, particularly when they were at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and were contributing to the development of the Malaysian Association of Social Science. Wan was the association's Vice-President from 2009 to 2014.

What struck me with my relationship with Wan? I think we had an understanding of the ways in which we both worked. He was a Malaysian intellectual. I have seen him across a table in seminar discussions at UBD, and in conferences in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, South Korea, the UK, and the Netherlands. Wan always conceptualized and turned presentations into something more. He was a thinker, a true scholar in love with ideas and empirical evidence. He always referred to me as "the synthesizer," taking a body of work and putting it into structure and narrative.

I heard of Wan's sudden death from a heart attack on May 18, 2022. I was working in my apartment in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, when an email came from Ismail Gareth Richards, who collaborated with Wan on a number of projects. The news came to him from Wan's sister, Datin Wan Hiyati Wan Ibrahim. I quite simply broke down in tears. In his email, Gareth

wrote: "I learned to admire his principled and progressive scholarship, his writings on the Malay working class, on indigenous peoples, on the environment, and on cultural studies, and his self-reflective, self-critical approach to knowledge creation." He also captured Wan's personality and considerable achievements in academic work and cultural life: "Wan was warm, loving, full of life, generous, and a fountain of knowledge—not just of the academic world he inhabited with distinction, but also of a vast cultural hinterland."

But what struck me, in my connection with Wan, was that the debates about the divisions between East and West, between Orientalism, Western academic hegemony, and the "captive mind" of the East, while important, do not present obstacles to our collaboration across cultures, nations, and regions, nor should they. I forged a scholarly relationship with Wan; he was a free thinker; I admired his formidable intellect. This was not Western hegemony. I engaged with Wan on equal terms. Indeed, he took me to task for my omissions in the field of local research into peasantries and laborers in Malaysia. This certainly did not prevent us from working together, and fervently discussing these issues.

Wan was cosmopolitan, a devout Muslim. However, as an anthropologist with cross-cultural sensitivity, he had an expansive perspective on religious life, beliefs, and practices. Wan was also something of an academic itinerant. After secondary education at Sultan Ismail College in Kota Bharu, Terengganu, Wan's home state, he was awarded a scholarship under the Australian Colombo Plan from 1967 to 1971. He graduated with a BA (Hons) in anthropology at Monash University, Melbourne in 1972, and then proceeded to his PhD studies at the same university. He completed his doctorate in anthropology and sociology in 1978 on "A Malay Proletariat: The Emergence of Class Relations

on a Malaysian Plantation.” It was awarded in 1980. During his time in Melbourne, he worked as a tutor and then senior tutor in anthropology up until 1979. He must have decided, on his return to Malaysia, that he would lend his experience to most of the main universities in Malaysia. He adopted a nomadic lifestyle, rather like the Penan of Sarawak with whom he studied and wrote about on their storytelling as counter-narrations of Malaysian nation-state developmentalism. He was lecturer at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), 1980-1984; his publications started to appear from 1982. He was Associate Professor at Universiti Malaya (UM) 1984-1998; Professor at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) 1998-2003; and Professor at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 2003-2008. He returned to UM in 2008-2009 as Professor. He also received an appointment at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UTM), 2010-2011. He joined Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) as Professor, 2011-2020, and later on received a two-year appointment as Visiting Professor at Taylor’s University.

What were my memorable times and moments with Wan? There were many, such as evenings at his house in Brunei when the family hosted university colleagues, with young Bruneian musicians serenading us. Of course, Wan also provided entertainment. He was conscious of the lack of live performances in Brunei and he provided every encouragement and opportunity for local musicians to perform.

I also remember his rather alternative taste in clothing. He was one of the most sartorial academics I ever met. There was an evening in Chiang Mai, after a conference at the university, when I went with him and his wife to the Anusarn Night Market. Wan, noted for his hats, caps, scarves, Indian and kurta blouson shirts, and imaginative trousers and suede boots,

probably visited every shop in the market, trying on clothes. We ended up in a café/bar, where he borrowed the resident singer's guitar and performed.

His combination of musical skills and academic presentations were illustrated in his introductions to conferences and seminars. Two occasions come to mind. In December 2012, we organized a conference in the ASEAN Inter-university Seminar on the theme of "Human Insecurities in Southeast Asia" at the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS/Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at UBD, in cooperation with the National University of Singapore. I chaired an opening session where I invited Wan to perform on his guitar, and then present a lecture on "Anthropologizing Human Insecurities" (see Carnegie et al. 2016). Meanwhile, when he retired from UBD, I had the honor to introduce Wan. At another IAS/FASS seminar, he played and sang. I treasure his performances, fortunately recorded by IAS@UBD in a YouTube video titled "Zawawi Ibrahim on Transnational Scholarship in the Periphery" (October 21, 2020).

In our last ten years together at UBD, we produced several co-edited volumes in the UBD-IAS/Springer series "Asia in Transition." Wan was always generous with his time, energy, and commitment to scholarship and publication. In addition to the book with Paul Carnegie, we published a substantial volume on Borneo Studies (King et al. 2017); and with Gareth Richards, *Discourses, Agency and Identity in Malaysia* (Zawawi Ibrahim et al. 2021).

Our collaboration goes back a long way. In a panel which I chaired in June-July 1995 at the EUROSEAS conference in Leiden on "Human-Environment Interactions in South-East Asia," Wan provided a paper which we then published in the Centre for South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull Occasional Paper series (1995). This was followed a few years later with him

writing an Epilogue to a book I edited, *Environmental Challenges in South-East Asia* (Zawawi Ibrahim 1998a). Most recently, we wrote a chapter together on local and transnational anthropologies in Borneo (King and Zawawi Ibrahim 2019), and Wan contributed a most thoughtful piece on the anthropology of remembering to another of my co-edited books; it will remain a valuable personal reminder of Wan's early childhood and his development as an anthropologist (Zawawi Ibrahim 2021). One of his very last papers with two colleagues from FASS at UBD will be published in *Suvannabumi* this year. This is a fitting tribute to Wan's contribution to KIAS-BUFS (Ullah et al. 2022).

I will always remember my time with Wan. Memories of his music, scholarship, and friendship are for keeps. His contributions to our understanding of Malaysian society, culture, and history, and his comparative work on the wider Southeast Asia, are important. It is fitting that his most well-known book *The Malay Labourer*, first published in 1998 (1998b), was reprinted this year (2022). His research on the Malay working class and peasantries (Zawawi Ibrahim 2010) will remain with us for a long, long time. May he rest in peace.

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