
Some Reminiscences about Henri J. M. Claessen

Jianping Yi

South China Normal University

A month ago, I was shocked and saddened by the sudden news that Henri J. M. Claessen had passed away. When I thought about that Henri was envied by many scholars, I was a little bit calmer. At his age, he belonged to the category of people in China with extremely high life expectancy and good fortune. Moreover, his lifetime achievements in the study of human social evolution have reached the top.

But in the end, there is still some reluctance to accept this news. Last winter, *Social Sciences in China*, the most influential journal in China, planned to hold a discussion on the origins of civilization and planned to invite several leading scholars to participate. The first person I thought of was Henri, although I knew clearly that he was already in his nineties, I had the impression that he was still physically fit and energetic, and that he had been active in academia, publishing papers from time to time. This time, he also accepted my invitation. In the subsequent correspondence, he told me that he had some new ideas. However, on February 14 of this year, I suddenly received a letter from him as follows:

Dear Jianping,

*It is with sad feelings that I write this letter: I am sorry, but I cannot write it. I have no longer the energy to do such an undertaking. In case you cannot think of one, may I offer two names of scholars who are certainly capable to do it. The first is Dmitri Bondarenko, from Moscow. It is a great scholar, and, what is more, he has some time ago a large article regarding the subject in question. His e-mail: dbondar@hotmail. The other is Nikolay Kradin, from Wladiwostok. He is a Nomad expert, and wrote several articles on state and state formation. His e-mail is kradin@mail.ru.**

Social Evolution & History, Vol. 21 No. 2, September 2022 172–174
© 2022 'Uchitel' Publishing House

*Very sorry for this letter. I hope you can find a solution.
With best wishes, Henri*

This retreat must have been of no choice. He must have been very weak. ‘I have no longer the energy to do such an undertaking,’ from those words, we might feel this respected old man's helplessness in the last resort. He was not an old man who would easily admit defeat. He was not an old man who would easily put down on academics. I still habitually thought that he was only recuperating temporarily, and when he was recovered, he could be active academically again in a not long time. However, after six months, Henri could not hold on anymore. He really left us.

But Henri will never leave us. He will always live on in his life of scholarship and among the scholars coming after him. Without his explorations, the study of human social evolution would never have been what it is now. Without him, there might not be the present ‘early states,’ one of the most important concepts in cultural anthropology.

I have known Henri for a long time. Back to 2003, I was planning a visit to Leiden University and needed to find a host institution. Another respected friend of mine, Robert L. Carneiro, wrote to him and asked him to help me. Henri readily agreed and eventually helped me find the International Institute for Asian Studies (Leiden) as a host institution. In 2003–2004, I spent six months there. As my tutor, Henri came to my office every Tuesday afternoon for two or three hours to discuss with me issues on the evolution of early human societies, and particularly, of course, on the ‘early state.’ He sometimes brought other Dutch scholars to join us. Among them was the archaeologist Pieter van de Velde.

Then, in 2011, I visited Leiden University again, and as before, we did discussions once a week. Sometimes he drove me to his home in Wassenaar, a very beautiful Dutch town. It was a rainy season.

From March 4 to 11, 2006, on my invitation, Henri and his wife visited Beijing. He gave three lectures, respectively at the Institute of World History and the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and at Peking University, on ‘Early State Studies,’ ‘How and Why States Originated,’ and ‘The Fall of Early States.’ His talks were very welcome there. I found some people to translate them into Chinese and published them in some Chinese journals.

Later on, I also invited him to write a special paper, ‘From Incidental Leaders to Paramount Chiefs: The Evolution of Socio-political

Organization,' which was translated into Chinese and published in the prestigious Chinese journal, *Historical Research*, No. 5, 2012. Later, the English version of this article was published in *Social Evolution & History*, Vol. 13, No. 1, March 2014.

In fact, his name was already known to Chinese academics as early as in the 1980s, when some parts of *The Early State*, which he edited with Peter Skalník, were translated into Chinese. Since that time, the concept of 'early states' has been used in Chinese academia, and more and more frequently. Today, it is one of the most common and important concepts used by Chinese scholars to study the evolution of early societies.

Henri is gone. And he is not gone. He lives among us forever.

NOTE

* By the way, I had already invited Dmitri Bondarenko and Nikolay Kradin to join our discussion on the origins of civilizations last year, before Henri's recommendation.