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# The New York Review of Books

## One Decent Man

**Geremie R. Barmé**JUNE 28, 2018 ISSUE*Simon Leys: Navigator Between Worlds*by Philippe Paquet, translated from the French by Julie Rose  
Carlton: La Trobe University Press/Black Inc., 664 pp., \$35.00

### 1.

The thought of hearing back from Simon Leys filled me with dread. It was late 1976 and I was an exchange student at a university in Shenyang, in northeast China. I'd only recently learned that Pierre Ryckmans, the man who had taught me Chinese, was none other than Simon Leys, a writer both celebrated and reviled in the French-speaking world.

Mao Zedong had died in September. Not long after, Leys published an obituary in the Australian press. Mao, he said, had

outlived himself by some twenty years. If he had died a few years after the Liberation, he would have gone down in history as one of China's most momentous leaders. Unfortunately, during the last part of his life, by stubbornly clinging to an outdated utopia, by becoming frozen in his own idiosyncrasies and private visions...he became in fact a major obstacle to the development of the Chinese revolution.

For nearly thirty years Mao had been the only fixed point in the tumultuous life of China. In the mid-1960s the uprising of the Red Guards, zealous high school students who attacked Mao's enemies, had made the People's Republic an epicenter of youthful rebellion, and although my original interest in China was inspired by Taoism and classical literature, I was also enamored of contemporary politics.

During my third year as an undergraduate at the Australian National University, Pierre had encouraged me to apply for a scholarship to study in China. After two years in Shenyang, and despite mounting misgivings—every day in the People's Republic offered grim new revelations—I remained sympathetic to the Chinese Revolution in the abstract. When Mao died, he was mourned around me on a pharaonic scale. Yet here was my teacher—the scholar who had taught us that China was “a concept of universality, a way of achieving humanity, an intermediary between man and cosmic harmony”—saying that the recently dead Chairman was “both the architect and the cornerstone of the most gigantic totalitarian bureaucracy this planet has ever known.”

We were still in contact by mail, and our student–teacher bond made me feel like a foreign traitor, something the cadres

*Ryckmans Family Archives*

*Pierre Ryckmans, who wrote under the name Simon Leys, on the Great Wall of China, 1955*

and our teachers darkly warned us about. I felt compelled to say something. In doggerel literary Chinese scrawled with my best calligraphic flourish I sent Pierre a note saying that he was a reactionary, complicit with the autocratic Nationalist regime on Taiwan, so-called Free China.

After weeks of anxiety, one day the concierge-warden of our student dorm handed me a letter addressed in the sinuous Chinese hand that I knew so well. I can recall my embarrassment: I was ashamed at having sent an intemperate letter to someone who had been unfailingly encouraging. By then the “Gang of Four”—Mao’s powerful faction, led by his wife, that had dominated the last years of the Cultural Revolution—had been purged and the towering edifice of Maoism was crumbling all around us. Classmates, teachers, and even members of the defunct Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team—men from the People’s Liberation Army who had run the university—furtively related stories previously only whispered to loved ones.

I was prepared for a harsh response, but Pierre caught me off guard. He’d returned my original letter with a short note attached: he could well imagine that the environment was fraught and that I was swept up in the hysteria. In time, he said, I might want to reconsider what I had written; he was returning my letter “for your records.” It was a mark of the extent of his empathy. Eventually, back in Australia, he forgave my youthful petulance in person and encouraged me to pursue a doctorate under his supervision.

One of the many things that Philippe Paquet’s *Simon Leys: Navigator Between Worlds* reveals is why Pierre returned that shabby note of mine forty years ago. In the French edition of his 1976 book *Broken Images*, he said: “If, every year, it’s Maoist fervour that brings us a good half of our new students, well, as far as that goes, long live Maoism! (I would be all the less inclined to discourage them as I see in them, in part, the starting point of my own itinerary.)”

Paquet tells us that Ryckmans was “vexed by the idea that a biography might one day be devoted to him,” and he liked to quote the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz: “All biographies are obviously false.... Biographies are like shells; they don’t tell you much about the mollusc that lived in them.” Nonetheless he gave Paquet his unstinting support. He opened up his extensive files, which were, it must be said, more thorough than the clumsy dossiers the Chinese authorities assemble on their hapless citizens. He also gave Paquet long interviews, kept up an extensive correspondence with him, and provided him with unpublished autobiographical notes.

Ryckmans’s many published works—masterful studies of the late-dynastic artists Su Renshan and Shitao; elegant translations of Shen Fu, Lu Xun, Confucius, and Simone Weil; a novel about Napoleon; an anthology of literature on the sea; nuanced essays on authors as diverse as Victor Segalen, Vladimir Nabokov, and Evelyn Waugh—continue to address readers with an immediacy that requires little explication. But for those interested in his Belgian lineage, the history of his nom de plume, and the details of his impact in France and elsewhere, this multifaceted biography is a revelation. Paquet gives meticulous, if sometimes overwrought, accounts of the controversies and fiery exchanges that were a feature of my teacher’s life.

An early target of the “united front” activities of the Beijing government to influence impressionable minds, Ryckmans first visited China on an all-expenses-paid trip in 1955, when he was a law student in Louvain. Like many study-tourists before and after him, he was captivated by what he called “a fervour, a youthful energy, a feeling of creative dynamism” in the new People’s Republic. He was also impressed by a lengthy interview granted to the Belgian delegation by Premier Zhou Enlai, someone whom Ryckmans, writing as Simon Leys, described years later as a man with “a talent for telling blatant lies with angelic suavity.” He returned to his studies overwhelmed by two emotions: friendship for the Chinese and hope for their revolution.

The encounter with what he called the “other hemisphere” of humanity also left him “convinced of this obvious fact: not learning Chinese was inconceivable.” With the People’s Republic of China closed to Western students, in 1958 he went to study in Taiwan and for over a decade immersed himself in the peripheral Chinese world, in that island republic as well as

in Singapore and Hong Kong. In Taiwan he married Chang Hanfang, a young woman from a family that had fled from the Communist takeover of mainland China, and after some years living in stretched circumstances with a young family in Hong Kong, he eagerly accepted a well-paid job teaching Chinese at the Australian National University in Canberra. Frequent leave from his teaching duties allowed him to visit and work in Hong Kong and the People's Republic. As a result of those forays he continued to observe the unfolding drama of Mao's China and evolved from his early enthusiasm to become one of the most controversial and sharpest polemicists of his time. Unlike most polemical essays, however, Leys's writings on Mao's China have endured, on account of their intellectual honesty and literary excellence.

## 2.

Simon Leys made an appearance only after Pierre Ryckmans had published works on art history and a translation under his own name. The nom de plume was invented “on the hoof and for petty bureaucratic reasons”: Ryckmans was about to publish a scaring book on the People's Republic just as he was offered a diplomatic appointment at the newly established Belgian embassy in Beijing. Neither China nor Belgium wanted a comfortable rapprochement compromised by a minor annoyance.

The first and most influential of the books Ryckmans wrote as Simon Leys, *The Chairman's New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, appeared in French in 1971. It opens with an untranslated epigraph in Chinese: “The refusal of one decent man outweighs the acquiescence of the multitude.” The Chinese word for “one decent man”—*shi*, literally “scholar”—also describes an individual who combines ethical probity with a sense of mission. Leys quoted this line from the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian (second century BCE) as a self-description for readers in the know. The aphorism also summed up a tradition of lone protest that Ryckmans admired. He associated it with both the writer Lu Xun—the testy twentieth-century paragon of Chinese conscience—and George Orwell, a man whose “massive integrity...did not suffer the slightest gap between word and deed.”

Paquet calls *The Chairman's New Clothes* a “red-hot rant of a book,” a description that strikes a rare false note in this otherwise confident biography. Leys was a prodigious lampoonist, but the book is above all a masterwork of China watching: a demonstration of the formidable skills required to understand what he aptly calls the “lugubrious merry-go-round” of Chinese politics. As Leys later remarked when discussing his friend László Ladány, the editor of *China News Analysis* in Hong Kong (an indispensable source for China watchers from the 1950s to the 1990s), the required skills for “the untwisting of official lies” included an ability to

absorb industrial quantities of the most indigestible stuff; reading Communist literature is akin to munching rhinoceros sausage, or to swallowing sawdust by the bucketful....[The China watcher] must know how to milk substance and meaning out of flaccid speeches, hollow slogans, and fanciful statistics; he must scavenge for needles in Himalayan-size haystacks; he must combine the nose of a hunting hound, the concentration and patience of an angler, and the intuition and encyclopedic knowledge of a Sherlock Holmes.

Confronted by Maoist-inspired violence in Hong Kong during the late 1960s, Leys employed these skills to understand developments in the country that had enthralled him since that initial trip in 1955. “This sort of face-to-face encounter with the evidence, however painful, cannot be easily avoided by anyone who has lived through the ‘Cultural Revolution’ on China's doorstep and who has not been shielded from the truth by a blessed ignorance of the Chinese language,” he wrote in the foreword to *The Chairman's New Clothes*:

The author of this work...was impelled—by the weight of evidence thrown up in the texts, facts and personal accounts which assailed him daily in Hong Kong throughout the years of the “Cultural Revolution”—to cry out, like the child in the fairy story, “But the Emperor has no clothes!”

The book set off a furor among French intellectuals and *soixante-huitard* activists who, disillusioned with the Soviet

Union, had been seduced by Mao's revolution-within-a-revolution. But Ryckmans hadn't set out to be a contrarian; his "conscience," he said, had been "forced out of its calm retreat at the sight of what it took to be a gigantic imposture." Even before he first published in English as Leys, in 1976, he contemplated "retiring" his alter ego so as to concentrate on his work as a teacher and an art historian. But events—the death of Mao, the arrest of the Gang of Four, Deng Xiaoping's return to power, the advent of dissidents like Wei Jingsheng and Liu Xiaobo, as well as the massacre of June 4, 1989—conspired to turn Simon Leys into something of an *homme providentiel*. His voice of conscience was heard well into the 1990s. The Sinologist Pierre Ryckmans had melded with the polemicist Simon Leys, or as Paquet puts it, "the pseudonym ended up eclipsing the patronym":

It was not actually as Pierre Ryckmans that a writer hoped to talk to us about George Orwell or Napoleon, French literature or university teaching, the shipwreck of the *Batavia* and its survivors, or Segalen's exoticism; it was as Simon Leys, someone who may well have wanted to hide his "natural timidity" behind a borrowed name, someone who, obviously, laid claim to a whole raft of experiences.

It was Leys who knew that "to be right too soon is the worst way of being wrong." He was attacked (and in some circles still is) by the China experts he dubbed a "sad, drab nest of vipers": as a classical sinologist and art historian he was unqualified to comment on politics; he "hated China"; he was an Orientalist nostalgic for a make-believe past. From as early as 1976, however, I learned that among those who could not speak for themselves during the Maoist years he was deeply respected. He was admired by, and had contact with, a number of prominent literary and intellectual figures who had for many years been forced into silence. Paquet, otherwise meticulous, overlooks this aspect of Ryckmans's "Chinese life."

In 1976 I met Gladys and Yang Xianyi in Beijing. Literary translators of great renown, the couple had been released from jail only a few years earlier. They had met at Oxford when Xianyi was studying classics in the mid-1930s. Together they translated some of China's most famous writers, including Sima Qian and Lu Xun. At a public seminar during their first visit to Canberra in 1980, Yang Xianyi thanked Ryckmans for his work and expressed the hope that he would be able to visit China again. Yang would pay for his outspokenness, and for accepting an invitation to dine privately with Pierre and his wife, Hanfang: a local pro-Communist patriot reported it all to the Chinese embassy and, back in Beijing, Yang was subjected to renewed criticism.

The Yangs in turn introduced me to Yang Jiang, a distinguished playwright who had translated Cervantes and just published *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters*, an elegiac memoir about her experiences in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution with her scholar husband, Qian Zhongshu. Qian was celebrated not only for his linguistic genius and encyclopedic scholarship but also for his talent as a novelist. Allowed to return to Beijing in the early 1970s, Yang and Qian had academic positions that gave them access to foreign publications, including the work of Simon Leys (both read French). When I met them in 1981 they immediately asked about my teacher, Li Keman (Pierre's Chinese name). "He spoke out on our behalf when others were silent," they told me. The famously caustic Qian, who had a photographic memory, gleefully quoted from Leys's barbed and coruscating prose. He particularly appreciated a remark about China having a political system that "breaks eggs without ever making an omelette."

Qian and Yang knew the costs of that system well. Their son-in-law, a teacher at Beijing Normal University who had spoken out against Lin Biao, the head of the army and Mao's "close comrade-in-arms," was driven to hang himself. In an essay he contributed to a revised and expanded version of Yang's memoir *Lost in the Crowd*, Qian expressed "remorse" for what he called "our lack of courage" during those years: "Our only boldness," he wrote, "was a lack of enthusiasm for the endless movements and struggles in which we participated." He and Yang both applauded the searing indignation that coursed through Leys's writing and his efforts to avenge "innocent victims." The admiration was mutual. In his preface to *Lost in the Crowd*, Leys called Yang Jiang "one of those subtle artists who know how to say less in order to express more."

In 1984, Pierre asked me to bring Qian and Yang a copy of an essay he had just published called "Orwell: The Horror of

Politics,” in which he noted the extent to which Orwell was “being secretly read” in China and under other totalitarian regimes (something confirmed by Dong Leshan, the Chinese translator of Orwell). A few days later, Zhongshu asked me to convey his admiration to Pierre. On a sheet of handmade *Xuan* paper, in his distinctive calligraphic hand, Qian congratulated Pierre that he had not “overturned the verdict”—*fan'an*, a classical expression made even more resonant following the Cultural Revolution—on Orwell but rather “made the case” (*ding'an*) for a new understanding of him. In particular, he appreciated Pierre’s observation about the “human dimension” of Orwell: “What ensures his superior originality as a political writer is the fact that *he hated politics*.” Leys also quoted Bernard Crick’s 1980 biography of Orwell: “*He argued for the primacy of the political only to protect non-political values.*”

### 3.

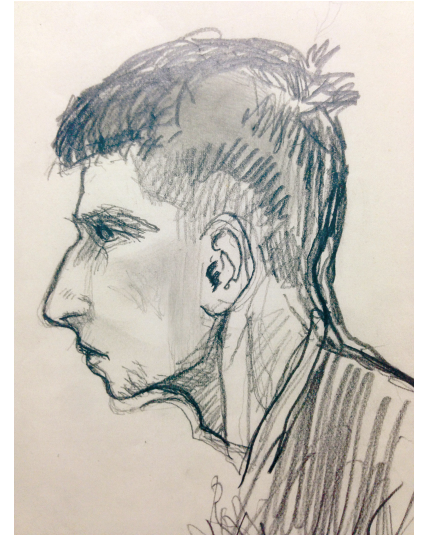
Paquet’s biography is long—645 pages including endnotes—and thorough. It may seem the last word on Ryckmans-Leys, but there is still room to elaborate on the story it tells. More details will keep emerging about the decades Pierre spent in Australia, and about the influence he had on students both there and in Hong Kong: noted art historians; specialists in modern Chinese thought, politics, and law; translators; writers. One of Pierre’s students, Suzette Cook, helped document China’s gulag over the decades. Another, Kevin Rudd, served twice as Australia’s prime minister.

Paquet has nonetheless brought to light a wide range of unknown riches from Leys’s archive: twenty unpublished translations from Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*; notes made over fifteen years for a work on Lu Xun; material assembled for a comparative study of that writer and his brother, the essayist Zhou Zuoren. Leys, we learn, even wrote a second, unfinished work of fiction after the award-winning novel *The Death of Napoleon*. “He and Hanfang could not agree on the plot’s resolution,” Paquet informs us.

After a short trip in 1975, Pierre, now widely known to be Simon Leys, the famous critic of the Communist government, was repeatedly frustrated in his attempts to visit the People’s Republic. Even at its most open during the 1980s, China could not accept Simon Leys. Over the last four decades of his life China became instead “a region of the mind.” This was not the antiquarian fantasy of a Western sinologue. It was closer to the “other China” inhabited by modern Chinese writers and artists like the essayists Lin Yutang (1895–1976) and Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967), as well as Feng Zikai (1898–1975), the artist, calligrapher, essayist, translator, and Buddhist layman who took refuge in his deep spiritual affiliations and in the pursuit of an art that, as Feng put it, “preserves the heart.”

Pierre readily recognized how artists like Feng—modern-day inheritors of the “scholar-amateur” ideal that he extolled and in many ways pursued—lived as exiles in their own country. “Were he alive today,” he wrote me in 2008 about Feng, “I am afraid, the magical *innocence* of his original genius would doom him to even more radical ‘exile.’” His own understanding of exile was informed by his profound Catholic faith, something notably demonstrated in his 1996 contretemps with Christopher Hitchens over Mother Teresa in these pages.\* “Our true motherland is eternity,” he wrote in his essay “Memento Mori.” “We are the mere passing guests of time.” The sentiment echoed one of his favorite poets, Li Bo of the Tang dynasty: “This Heaven and Earth are the hostel for Creation’s ten thousand forms, where light and darkness have passed as guests for a hundred ages. But our floating lives are like a dream; how many moments do we have for joy?”

In 1966, as the People’s Republic slid into chaos, Pierre wrote confidently that in China “the preservation of works and of the material heritage of the tradition do not necessarily prove the latter’s renaissance.” But “on the other hand, the convulsions that affect the political, social and cultural life of China do not necessarily imply a break in the profound continuity of Chinese civilisation.” He elaborated on the nature of that “profound continuity” in his 1986 lecture “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” which he once called the “essay of all my work as a sinologist on the China of the



Ryckmans Family Archives

Self-portrait by Pierre Ryckmans, circa 1950s

past” that he valued most highly. “The Chinese past is both spiritually active and physically invisible,” he told his audience. In the Chinese world, “life-after-life was not to be found in a supernature, nor could it rely upon artefacts: man only survives in man—which means, in practical terms, in the memory of posterity, through the medium of the written word.”

The written word has thus far given Ryckmans-Leys his own sort of “life-after-life.” During his lifetime he was praised by scholars, writers, and translators including Qian Zhongshu, Yang Jiang, Yang Xianyi, and Dong Leshan; today, figures like the historian and public intellectual Lei Yi and the essayist and publisher Xu Zhiyuan have found a kindred spirit in Leys. The names of his once-famous detractors, by contrast, are now mostly remembered because of the barbs he aimed at them. Readers in China and around the world interested in Chinese history and culture, the spirit of humanism, literature, and the life of the mind will continue to discover and rediscover this navigator between worlds. “Let’s keep reading these works,” the philosopher Jean-François Revel wrote forty years ago in his preface to Leys’s *Chinese Shadows*, “so that we may see that in the age of the lie, the truth sometimes throws its head back and bursts out laughing.”

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\* See “In Defense of Mother Theresa,” *The New York Review*, September 19, 1996; “Mother Theresa,” *The New York Review*, December 19, 1996; and “On Mother Theresa,” *The New York Review*, January 9, 1997. ↩