

PIERRE RYCKMANS

1935–2014



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE RYCKMANS FAMILY

Pierre Ryckmans was an extraordinary voice in Australian writing. His death in Sydney on 11 August 2014 in the company of his wife Han Fang and their four children was the departure of the man, but his exquisite writings, mostly published under his pseudonym Simon Leys, will continue to be read for generations to come. A Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, he held academic appointments as Reader at the Australian National University (ANU) (1970–87) and as Chair of Chinese at the University of Sydney (1987–93). Born in Brussels, he retained Belgian citizenship by taking dual nationality as an Australian citizen late in life. As a member of the Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique, he was recipient of numerous European literary and academic awards, including the Stanislas Julien Award from the Institut de France for his book on the Chinese artist Su Renshan in 1970 at the beginning of his writing career, and more recently the Premio Mundial Cino Del Duca (2005).

Immediately after settling in Australia Ryckmans became a celebrity writer in Francophone literary and art circles. His work was internationally known to academics in the field of Chinese literature and contemporary Chinese politics and society, but little known to Anglophone

general readers. On the other hand, Chinese scholars and general readers were impressed by his scholarship and by the fact that this foreigner scholar was actually writing in erudite Chinese about his findings in publications. (It must be appreciated that very few ‘foreign scholars’ ever attain a level of written Chinese language competence to discuss and publish their findings, especially in the humanities.) His novel *La mort de Napoléon* (1986) won wide acclaim in Francophone circles throughout the world. When it finally appeared in English as *The Death of Napoleon* (1992) it won the NSW Premier’s Christina Stead Prize for Fiction and became a bestseller. Readers who admired his writing were intrigued to learn that Simon Leys was celebrated internationally yet had been living in virtual obscurity in Australia. They eagerly sought out his earlier books, and watched for new ones. A powerful writer in both French and English, Ryckmans’ preference for writing in French meant that there was always a time lag before the publication of an English edition, and also that not all of his books appeared in English. His celebrity status in Australia was consolidated by his presentation of the 1996 Boyer Lectures, broadcast nationwide on ABC Radio National, and afterwards published as ‘The View from the Bridge’ at the ANU on its electronic *China in the World* Newsletter.

Pierre Ryckmans majored in law and art history at Université Catholique de Louvain: law was a family tradition, and painting was what he loved. A one-month visit to China as part of a Belgian Youth delegation in 1955 inspired him to learn the Chinese language. He wished to have direct access to its literature in order to know Chinese culture with the same intimacy that he knew European culture. Before long, he was in Taiwan living amongst Chinese people, immersed in learning the language, and studying the literature and art that had established the aesthetic foundations of Chinese culture over the centuries. In pursuing this new field of knowledge he used the forensic analysis developed during his years of studying European literature and art. His first books were translations from Chinese with introductions: Shen Fu’s *Six récits au fil inconstant des jours* (1966), *la Vie et l’œuvre de Su Renshan: rebelle, peintre, et fou, 1814–1849* (1970), and his doctoral thesis, *Les “Propos sur la peinture” de Shitao*, presented at l’Institut belge des hautes études chinoises (1970). Retitled for commercial publication as

Les Propos sur la peinture du Moine Citrouille-amer (1984), this still remains in print.

Those who knew Pierre Ryckmans would generally describe him as reclusive. His family was of primary importance and he loved sailing, but also enjoyed the solitude of reading, writing, practising Chinese calligraphy, translating and watching cutting-edge art films. I was his colleague at the University of Sydney, where he was virtually invisible. He would present his lectures on Chinese literature and philosophy, and then promptly disappear. His students all referred to him as an inspiring teacher. But he had an intense dislike for the increasing administrative chores and endless meetings: colleagues believed he consigned university notices to the dustbin without ever glancing at them. He did not socialise on campus, and I may have been the only person to have had prolonged conversations with him during his six years there. I had known him since the late 1970s, when we established an instant friendship because of our shared research interest in the writer Lu Xun (1881–1936). Lu Xun was a supreme literary stylist whose brand of irony, satire and wit can often be detected in the writings of Simon Leys.

Ryckmans was never one for grandstanding or self-promotion, and his writings always resonated with truth and humility. He was notoriously adamant in his refusal to be interviewed by journalists, so it is not surprising that little information about his early life exists in English. I suspect that he wanted people to know him from his writings: he the author was of little significance, except to those he loved and who loved him. However, two research articles provide a rich source of material on the man and his works: Laurent Six, 'Aux origines d'*Ombres chinoises*: une mission de six mois au service de l'ambassade de Belgique en République populaire de Chine' and Nicolas Idier, 'Présence chinoise et réflexion sur l'art dans l'oeuvre de Simon Leys,' both published in *Textyles: Revue des lettres belges de langue française*, 34 (2008), pp. 65–77 and 78–93 respectively. The first was reprinted online on 13 August 2014, two days after Ryckmans' death, and translated into English by 'Not Bored!' on 23 August 2014, with the title 'China: How Pierre Ryckmans Became Simon Leys'.

Prior to his relocation to Australia in 1970, Ryckmans had lived for twelve years in Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong. While teaching at the New Asia College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, he also worked at searching through Peoples' Republic of China publications for the Belgian diplomatic corps in Hong Kong. The notes he made during 1967–70 form the backbone of his *Les habits neufs du président Mao* (1971; *The Chairman's New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural*

Revolution, 1978). The first of many books published under the pseudonym of Simon Leys, this turned him into an international celebrity for its truthful exposure of the extreme sufferings perpetrated on the Chinese population under Mao's dictatorship. The factual evidence he provided ensured Ryckmans remained superior to his detractors. He had harsh critics overseas, as well as in Australia, because the flood of China's Cultural Revolution propaganda had successfully hoodwinked even many so-called China experts.

In 1972 he spent six months in China working in the newly established Belgian Embassy, during which he made seven trips to various places in the Chinese hinterland. His observations were recorded in *Ombres Chinoises* (1974; *Chinese Shadows*, 1977). In the Foreword, it is with patently false and ironic humility that he names high profile apologists for the Mao regime such as Han Suyin, Edgar Snow and John King Fairbank:

My little book, far from having the impudent ambition to rival them, even less to dispute them, aims at being their modest complement, adding only some shadows without which even the most luminous portraits lack depth, offering a few notes – in counterpoint, as it were – about some details that have been omitted for one reason or another by those prestigious witnesses. As the Chinese maxim says, "In a thousand observations, the wise may make one that is foolish and the fool one that is wise." Let us simply say that I am offering here the modest contribution of the fool to the pertinent remarks of the wise.

His subsequent essays on Chinese literature, art and politics were collected in *Images brisées* (1976; *Broken Images*, 1979) and *La forêt en feu: essais sur la culture et la politique chinoises* (1983; *The Burning Forest: Essays on the Culture and Politics of Contemporary China*, 1988). His foray into Chinese politics had been a temporary diversion from his scholarly life as a man of letters. Thereafter, he committed himself to his own literary and art creations and translations, as well as to appreciating the works of creative writers and artists of the present and the past, and across cultures. The last works by Simon Leys aptly sum up the life of Pierre Ryckmans, and include *The Analects of Confucius* (1997; translation with notes), *The Wreck of the Batavia and Prosper* (2005), *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays* (2012), and Simone Weil's *On the Abolition of All Political Parties* (2013; translation).

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