

# China: How Pierre Ryckmans Became Simon Leys<sup>1</sup>

By Laurent Six<sup>2</sup>

The first words published by Pierre Ryckmans under the pseudonym of Simon Leys set the tone: “From generation to generation, the West has systematically ignored the revolutionary forces in China, each time preferring to support the rotten order against which these

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<sup>1</sup> *Translator’s note*: this essay was first published in *Textyles* #34, 2008, under the title “Aux origines d’*Ombres chinoises*: une mission de six mois au service de l’ambassade de Belgique en République populaire de Chine” (At the Origins of *Chinese Shadows*: a six-month mission in the service of the Belgian Embassy in the People’s Republic of China).

On 13 August 2014, two days after the death of Pierre Ryckmans, it was reprinted by rue89: <http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2014/08/13/chine-comment-pierre-ryckmans-est-devenu-simon-leys-254182>. This reprint didn’t have the original’s footnotes (they have been restored) and it was prefaced by the following not-very-informative note from Pierre Haski:

“Pierre Ryckmans, alias Simon Leys, dead Monday in Canberra at the age of 78, marked Sinology through several key books, like *Les habits neufs du Président Mao* and *Ombres chinoises*. In an article published in 2008 in *Textyles*, a Belgian journal of French literature, Laurent Six retraced the genesis of these publications, the role played by a French situationist, René Viénet, and Pierre Ryckmans’ stay at the Belgian Embassy in China. A page of history at the heart of the great history of ideas in which Pierre Ryckmans and Simon Leys have their place. We thank Laurent Six and the journal *Textyles* for having amiably authorized the reproduction of this article.”

<sup>2</sup> *Translator’s note*: Translated by NOT BORED! on 23 August 2014. All footnotes by the author, except where noted.

forces fight.”<sup>3</sup> He followed them with many examples that showed that, from the middle of the Nineteenth Century to 1970, the Western world constantly expressed its hostility to Chinese contestatory movements. European governments first ignored and then distrusted Mao Zedong because he appeared to be a revolutionary, but changed their attitude when Maoist authority revealed its essentially archaic and reactionary nature. Nevertheless, Leys never contested the international recognition of People’s Republic of China, which, he wrote, “makes good diplomatic sense.” What he emphasized was the “phenomenon of Maoist power that, ceasing to be revolutionary, becomes respectable.”<sup>4</sup>

The history of the publication of the *Habits neufs du président Mao* is now known.<sup>5</sup> We must emphasize the essential role played by René Viénet. Born in the Havre in 1944, a member of the Situationist International (SI), of which Guy Debord was the figurehead, he studied Chinese at the Langues O’ (École nationale des Langues orientales)<sup>6</sup> in 1963, the year that Jacques Pimpaneau started to teach there. And it was there that they became friends. Soon after, Viénet translated Harold Isaacs’ *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution 1925-1927* from English into French<sup>7</sup> and got Étienne Balazs’ *La Bureaucratie céleste* published.<sup>8</sup> From 1968 to 1971, Pimpaneau worked as a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong,<sup>9</sup> where he knew Pierre Ryckmans, who, like him, taught courses at the University’s New Asia College.<sup>10</sup> [Pimpaneau says:]

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<sup>3</sup> *Les Habits neufs du président Mao* (1971), in *Essais sur la Chine*, Paris, Robert Laffont, collection Bouquins, 1998, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 1, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Boncenne, *Pour Jean-François Revel. Un esprit libre*, Paris, Plon, 2006, pp. 88-95. Several supplementary details were furnished to me by Jacques Pimpaneau (letter dated 24 July 2006).

<sup>6</sup> *Translator’s note*: The National School of Oriental Languages.

<sup>7</sup> Gallimard, collection “La suite des temps,” 1967.

<sup>8</sup> Gallimard, collection “Bibliothèque des sciences humaines,” 1968.

<sup>9</sup> *Translator’s note*: English in original.

<sup>10</sup> *Translator’s note*: English in original.

Around the time of my stay in H.-K., René came to spend some time at my place. I spoke to him about Ryckmans, whom he had to meet. “I will invite him to a dinner while you are here. You have seen that he is passionate. But there is a condition: for the first quarter-hour at least, you must stop your anti-clerical charade because Ryckmans is very Catholic and it would be a shame if you chased him away.” A quarter of an hour was not necessary for Ryckmans and Viénet to discover that he had two qualities in common: political intelligence and intellectual integrity.<sup>11</sup>

When someone is surprised about the fortuitous meeting around a work table of a situationist Sinologist and a Catholic professor, Ryckmans evokes that evening in terms that are quasi-similar to those used by his colleague:

Etymologically both ‘university’ and ‘catholic’ imply a notion of universal opening. [...] With their generosity, their originality, their spirit, their courage and their intelligence, these were two men [Pimpaneau and Viénet] who very sympathetically judged the sad and bleak vipers’ nest of French Sinology.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike his friend Jean-Marie Simonet, who was one of the rare Belgian Sinologists of the times who had been hired from Brussels, Ryckmans was recruited locally. Insufficiently paid – especially because rent in Hong Kong is very expensive – and having a family to take care of, Ryckmans supplemented his income by scrutinizing the Chinese press for the Belgian diplomatic corps stationed in Hong Kong. Every two weeks, during the Cultural Revolution, from 1967 to 1969, he drafted reports that analyzed the development of the events in China.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Pimpaneau, letter to the author dated 24 July 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Ryckmans, letter to the author dated 21 July 2006.

Seeing that Western Sinologists and journalists sugarcoated the Cultural Revolution even more than the official Chinese newspapers did, Viénet told Ryckmans, “you must not limit all that you know to the friends with whom you dine; you must publish it.” Ryckmans having obtained a teaching position at the Australian National University in Canberra, Viénet – telephoning from Paris – extracted from him, chapter by chapter, what would become *Les Habits neufs*. In a letter to Pierre Boncenne sent January 2003, Ryckmans wrote about Viénet: “I know that he had to overcome powerful, organized resistance. One thing is certain: without him I probably would not have published anything. One can say quite literally that it was Viénet who invented me.”<sup>13</sup>

Known among Sinologists for his impeccable translations and his commentaries on Chinese culture and politics,<sup>14</sup> Pierre Ryckmans chose that occasion to take on the mask of “Simon Leys” in order to distinguish his work as a Sinologist from his work as a pamphleteer.

Upon his return to Paris, Viénet contacted Jean-François Revel, who, in his editorials for *L'Express*, had been one of the first to denounce Maoism. In addition, he was a literary advisor and collections director at Robert Laffont. Viénet also approached Revel because, while working with the publisher Jean-Jacques Pauvert, he had edited the “Liberties” collection, which was composed of classic and contemporary

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Pimpaneau, letter to the author dated 24 July 2006.

<sup>14</sup> At this time (the beginning of 1971), Pierre Ryckmans had already published an annotated translation of the *Six récits au fil inconstant des jours de Shen Fu* (Brussels, Larcier, 1966); a translation of and commentaries about the treatise of Shitao (Brussels, Belgian Institute for Higher Chinese Studies, 1970) “to serve as a contribution to the terminological and aesthetic study of the Chinese theories of painting”; a study of the history of art published by René Viénet and dedicated to the painter Su Renshan, a minor master of the first half of the 14th century (Paris-Hong Kong, Centre de publication de l’UER Extrême-Orient – Asie du Sud-Est de l’université de Paris, 1970); an annotated translation of the first part of the autobiography of Guo (Moruo), *Mes années d’enfance*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. Connaissance de l’Orient, 1970.

pamphlets greatly appreciated by the situationists. Following a several-month-long squabble between Viénet and Revel, the project of Laffont publishing *Les Habits neufs* collapsed.<sup>15</sup> Viénet then sought out Gérard Lebovici, who, in addition to large interests in the cinema, also possessed a young publishing house: Champ Libre. Viénet, though he resigned from the SI in February 1971, continued to maintain amiable contact with Debord, who in turn was friendly with Lebovici.

During their collaboration in the SI, Debord had used Viénet's Sinological competence to draft a major text, "The Explosion Point of Ideology in China."<sup>16</sup> This pamphlet, distributed in August 1967, was a scathing refutation of what the majority of Western intellectuals believed to be the triumph of Maoism.

The use of the expression "Pseudo-Cultural Pseudo-Revolution"<sup>17</sup> seemed to herald the first phrase of *Les Habits neufs*.<sup>18</sup> Champ Libre, which republished Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* in September 1971, became the publishing house that the situationists dreamed about.

At Champ Libre, Viénet founded the "Bibliothèque asiatique" (Asiatic Library), which constituted a veritable goldmine of documents that, in addition to being a violent counterpoint to the desire for rapprochement with the Maoists, was scientifically and literarily superior to everything that was written about China at the time. It was Lebovici personally who, having read the first two chapters of Simon Leys' book, immediately decided to publish it as part of Viénet's new collection.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Pierre Boncenne, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> Guy Debord, *Le Point d'explosion de l'idéologie en Chine*, in *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 11, October 1967, pp. 3-12; reprinted in Guy Debord, *Œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, collection Quarto, 2006, pp. 751-763.

<sup>17</sup> Guy Debord, *ibid.*, p. 8 (collection Quarto, p. 757).

<sup>18</sup> "The Cultural Revolution is revolutionary in name only and only cultural in its initial tactical pretext" (Simon Leys, *op. cit.*, p. 13).

<sup>19</sup> According to Pierre Boncenne, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

In the autumn of 1971, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was admitted to the United Nations. Among the Western countries, only the United Kingdom, the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland and the Netherlands had had embassies in Peking ever since the beginning of the 1950s; France joined them in 1964. Like several other European countries that wanted to add its voice to the chorus of nations, Belgium hastened to reestablish diplomatic relations with China, which had been broken off since the PRC was proclaimed in 1949. The Belgian government was thus led to open an embassy in Peking and to host a Chinese diplomat to Belgium. Summoned to Brussels on 26 May 1972, Li Lien-pi took office that same day. Diplomat Jacques Groothaert described him in the following way: "a man of distinguished bearing and discreet. He didn't speak French or English and said little about his previous diplomatic experience."<sup>20</sup>

The task of opening an embassy didn't devolve upon an ambassador but a *chargé d'affaires*.<sup>21</sup> In this case, it was the Belgian General Counsel to Osaka, Patrick Nothomb, who took care of all the material details that stewardship required. Once provided with such materials, the Belgian Embassy opened its doors on 11 April 1972. This embassy and the others were located in the Sanlitun area of the Chaoyang neighborhood, at the western edge of Peking. The majority of the foreigners in the capital lived there, which was where they found their stores, restaurants and houses.

For a long time, the Belgian Embassy occupied two offices on the sixth floor of the Peking Hotel. Seven people worked there. Ambassador Jacques Groothaert arrived on 20 May. Successively posted to Prague, Moscow, Mexico, Paris and Kinshasa, and then named General Counsel in San Francisco, Groothaert had also been an ambassador to Mexico. Patrick Nothomb, the *chargé d'affaires*, became the ambassador's closest advisor and collaborator.

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<sup>20</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA), letter by Jacques Groothaert, 30 May 1972 (n° 94).

<sup>21</sup> *Translator's note*: a diplomatic term-of-art that means a diplomat who runs an embassy in the absence of an ambassador.

Because the embassy had no one who spoke Chinese, the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, headed up by the Social-Christian Pierre Harmel since 1966, accepted the candidacy of Pierre Ryckmans, one of the few Belgians who spoke Chinese, and proposed that he become the cultural attaché to Peking.

For his monograph on the Chinese painter Su Renshan,<sup>22</sup> Ryckmans had won the Stanislas Julien Award (the highest distinction in this domain) from the Institut de France. Having not returned to China since his first month-long stay as a student-delegate from the Catholic University of Louvain in April 1955,<sup>23</sup> he “burned with the desire to see with [his] own eyes what [he] had been studying for so many years.”<sup>24</sup>

One might be surprised that, at the very beginning of its diplomatic relations with Peking, Belgium chose to name one of the most ironic detractors of Maoism, the author of the pamphlet *Habits neufs du président Mao*. The surprise increases when one learns that Ryckmans obtained his visa without difficulty. Patrick Nothomb proposes an explanation: “By granting him his visa under his real name, and not his pseudonym, the Chinese, who obviously knew that it was a question of a single person, had provided a way out, because they could hide behind this difference in names in order to save face.”<sup>25</sup>

It is more likely that, in this period of transition that traversed China, it seemed vital to Prime Minister Zhou En Lai and his

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<sup>22</sup> *Translator’s note: La vie et l’oeuvre de Su Renshan, rebelle, peintre et fou*, published by the Centre de publication de l’U.E.R. Extrême-Orient-Asie du Sud-Est de l’Université de Paris, 1970.

<sup>23</sup> Concerning the voyage of a group of a dozen young Belgians of diverse opinions, see Maurice Piraux, “Les relations entre la Belgique et la République populaire de Chine (1949-1979),” in *Courrier hebdomadaire du crisp*, Bruxelles, n° 838-839, 18 May 1979, pp. 20-21.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Ryckmans, letter to the author dated 24 March 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Marie Mersch and Patrick Nothomb, *Intolérance zéro. 42 ans de diplomatie*, Brussels, éd. Racine, 2004, p. 149.

“pragmatic” friends<sup>26</sup> to continue to render official homage to Mao, who was more and more senile, while working to efface the consequences of the Cultural Revolution: “The coming to Peking of Simon Leys, the sworn enemy of Maoism, was a godsend for them because he could only help them in their struggle against the Gang of Four.”<sup>27</sup>

Given the fact that Leys would probably publish new books against Mao, the fact of allowing him enter into China added value to his testimony, thanks to personal experience. After having obtained a semester’s leave from the University of Canberra, Ryckmans began his work at the Embassy in the second-half of April 1972.

Today, he describes his work as follows:

Total freedom. I had the good fortune of working for exceptionally open, likeable and intelligent people [...] who understood that by giving me free rein they obtained the best possible work from me. Thus, for those six months, I didn’t even spend 5 minutes in the office. I didn’t have an office – I lived at the hotel and I spent my time in the streets.<sup>28</sup>

After having been lodged by the Nothombs in their “miserable apartment” in the capital,<sup>29</sup> Ryckmans lived in “one of the principal hotels in Peking, located 10 minutes away by bike from the [Temple of the] White Cloud.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The political history of the PRC, from its founding to the death of Mao in 1976, has essentially been the history of a struggle between two clans: the Pragmatists (or the Realists), at the head of which Zhou Enlai won fame, and the Fundamentalists, for whom Mao never stopped serving by leading.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Marie Mersch and Patrick Nothomb, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>28</sup> Pierre Ryckmans, letter to the author dated 24 March 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Amélie Nothomb, *Biographie de la faim*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2004, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Leys, *Ombres chinoises*, Paris, uge, collection 10/18, n° 900, pp. 26 and 19.

In his memoirs, Baron Jacques Groothaert evokes the period in which Ryckmans worked at his side.

A lover of Chinese civilization, of which he had become a great connoisseur, he lived in China in the spring of 1972 as an official cultural attaché and Sinologist with the embassy. For me as a diplomat, curious but greatly ignorant of the Chinese language and culture, it was a privilege to be initiated and accompanied in my discovery by a colleague who combined erudition with a sense of humor and subtlety of observation with elegant writing.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to an archivist-secretary, the Embassy employed another secretary, Francis Ronse, who at least once accompanied Pierre Ryckmans on a voyage out to the provinces organized by the diplomatic corps.

“Every evening, or almost every one,” Groothaert recalls – “every week,” according to Ryckmans himself<sup>32</sup> – Pierre would submit to the Ambassador or to his representative a little bundle of sheets on which he’d written, in an immediately recognizable handwriting, composed of tiny characters but perfectly legible, reports that, once typed up, were sent unedited to Brussels.

In the archives of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are two large dossiers of unpublished political correspondence concerning China for 1972.<sup>33</sup> In them, one can find the majority of the reports that

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Groothaert, *Le Passage du Témoin*, Paris - Louvain-la-Neuve, éd. Duculot, collection Documents – Témoignages, 1991, p. 138. See also Jacques Groothaert, “Les regards, regrets et refus de Simon Leys,” in *La Revue générale*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Duculot, May 1992, pp. 61-66.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63 ; Pierre Ryckmans, letter to the author dated 24 March 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Archiving Service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade (MFA), political correspondence, China - 1972. Dossier n° 16.334, Film n° P 2490-2491, Dossier n° 2442.

constituted the material for the second book by Simon Leys, *Ombres chinoises*, published in 1974, after his departure from China.

As an attaché of the embassy, he couldn't sign these documents because only the ambassador or the *chargé d'affaires* had the right to do so. This is why all the reports were sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the signature of Jacques Groothaert or, if he were absent from China, Patrick Nothomb.

These reports were made from lived observations, analyses of the Chinese press, and varied reflections and judgments. At least once, they were a response to an express demand from Minister Harmel to see the opinions and information that the Ambassador could furnish about the cultural renaissance in China. In that very case, a nine-page-long report was made available to the Minister of Foreign Affairs less than a month later.<sup>34</sup> After two paragraphs referring to previous dispatches, there are several admirably clear-sighted pages about the cultural situation in China that are drafted in an elegant and precise style. Undeniably it is a text written by Ryckmans. An ambassador installed in China for only two months and ignorant of the language could never have been so discerning. If there remains the least doubt as to the identity of the author of those pages, it disappears upon reading *Ombres chinoises*. Its sixth chapter ("Cultural Life")<sup>35</sup> exactly reproduces dozens of phrases from them. Let us render unto Ryckmans what belongs to Leys.

Simon Leys affirms that he had the occasion to "accomplish seven successive visits to the provinces" of China over a period of six months.<sup>36</sup> Analysis of the reports sent by the Embassy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirms the interest of these trips.

In a report dated 23 September, titled "Voyages in China"<sup>37</sup> and signed by the Ambassador, one can read: "In four months' of trips, I

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<sup>34</sup> MFA, seven-page-long letter by Jacques Groothaert to Pierre Harmel, 24 July 1972. Subject: "Renaissance culturelle" en Chine Populaire (n° 190).

<sup>35</sup> Simon Leys, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-214.

<sup>36</sup> Simon Leys, *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> MFA, report dated 23 September 1972 (n° 296).

have been able to visit a half-dozen medium- and large-sized towns and to traverse by train, from north to south, a dozen provinces.” After evoking a 10-day-long trip through the provinces of Henan, Shaanxi and Shanxi in May 1972 organized by the diplomatic corps, the author says, “I made an individual trek that, by stages, led me from Peking to Canton.” There follows nine pages assuredly written by Ryckmans,<sup>38</sup> haphazardly dedicated to factories, culture, purchases made during free time, a visit to Shanghai where the house in which the Chinese Communist Party was founded, etc. A small instance of vanity that, today, one can take as an a posteriori wink: Ryckmans once cites himself in the third person. Let’s not forget that it was the Ambassador who signed these reports!

Several days later, Groothaert – weary or hesitant to usurp Ryckmans’ talent – sent two reports<sup>39</sup> written and signed by the “Sinologist attaché of the embassy,” which constitutes a masterpiece of perspicacious irony. Another trip is related in a letter dated 16 October.<sup>40</sup> Nothomb and Ryckmans visit Wuhan, Changsha and Shaoshan, where they pose with their guides in front of the place Mao was born.<sup>41</sup>

Going through these documents, one finds here and there – or, rather, one re-finds, because the historian discovered these archives after having read Simon Leys – anecdotes that serve as departure points for reflections developed in *Ombres chinoises*. In Wuhan, Ryckmans met with a group of officials. In Dazhai, an official asked him for news about what he was publishing in Paris. In brief, many small rays of sunlight, quickly hidden by Maoist censorship, that fleetingly gave a little thickness to Chinese reality.

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<sup>38</sup> In the “intermède sur les moyens de transport” (Simon Leys, *ibid.*, pp. 81-86), one finds phrases entirely taken from this report.

<sup>39</sup> MFA, letters by Jacques Groothaert to Pierre Harmel dated 26 September and 5 October 1972 (n° 310 and 334, with two reports, five and six pages long, signed by Pierre Ryckmans included as appendices).

<sup>40</sup> MFA, rapport n° 348 dated 16 October 1972.

<sup>41</sup> This photograph is reproduced in Simon Leys, *La Mort de Napoléon* (1986), Brussels, éd. Labor, coll. Espace Nord, n° 174, p. 114.

In *Ombres chinoises*, Simon Leys reports the meetings he had with diverse personalities, whose names he never mentions. It is under the cover of initials, imaginary or not, that they are presented. It is often possible, either through crosschecking or utilizing the index in *Essais sur la Chine*,<sup>42</sup> to name them with certainty. Thus, the “Italian Maoist ideologue M.”<sup>43</sup> is clearly the Italian Communist Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, and the “celebrated Anglo-Saxon novelist orating at a diplomatic cocktail party in Peking,” elsewhere named “Madam Z., the celebrated Anglo-Saxon novelist who, in her old age, has become the prophetess of Maoism,”<sup>44</sup> can only be Han Huyin.<sup>45</sup>

Born in China to a Chinese father, and having perfected her technical training in Belgium where she got married, Han Suyin, who had studied at the Université libre de Bruxelles, regularly frequented the Belgian Embassy in Peking where, on several occasions, she had to confront the sharp barbs of its young cultural attaché.<sup>46</sup>

After several months, disappointed by the artificial life of the Maoist capital, having acquired the feelings that he had seen virtually

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<sup>42</sup> *Essais sur la Chine* (1998), which brings together the five works that Leys devoted to contemporary China. His *Ombres chinoises* (pp. 229-432) includes an index (pp. 816-822) that allows the reader to identify certain individuals whose anonymity was initially protected by the use of an initial. Thus, the name of the celebrated British Sinologist Joseph Needham sends the reader to page 239, which includes the history of Professor N., who in 1972 recounted for a daily newspaper in Hong Kong that he'd seen the precious collection of sacred books at the Temple of the White Cloud in Peking. Transformed into a barracks, this monument was then closed to the public.

<sup>43</sup> Simon Leys, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>44</sup> Simon Leys, *ibid.*, pp. 296 and 379-381.

<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the Chinese name of Han Suyin is Zhou Guanghu.

<sup>46</sup> In an article published in *L'Express* (Paris) on 9 August 1980 and reprinted in *La Forêt en feu* (1983, pp. 181-193), Simon Leys threw ironic light on the contradictions and renunciations of this writer who specialized in “the art of navigating.”

the whole spectrum of what a foreigner could see and do at the time, and that he couldn't do more by prolonging his stay, Ryckmans left China. Jacques Groothaert writes, "I regretted it, but I wanted to leave complete freedom to this independent man, who did not belong in a diplomatic career, which he distrusted, as do many good spirits *a priori*."<sup>47</sup>

A telegram archived by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tells us that Ryckmans definitively left China for Hong Kong on 25 October 1972.<sup>48</sup>

On 6 April of that year, at a meeting in Brussels organized on the occasion of the departure of *chargé d'affaires* Nothomb for Peking, the General Director of Politics, Étienne Davignon, had already "emphasized the necessity of creating a corps of Belgian Sinologists. He mentioned the name of [Georges] Goormaghtigh, who could be engaged contractually for one year, in Peking, to perfect his knowledge of the Chinese language."<sup>49</sup>

Several weeks after Ryckmans' departure, the Chief of Protocol, Jean de Bassompierre, wrote to the Consul in Hong Kong:

The Leadership Council agreed that Simonet will go to Peking for a certain time and that Goormaghtigh will take the most-accelerated courses in Chinese possible in Hong Kong in order to be able to return to Peking usefully after a period of time that, we hope, will be very brief, thus freeing Simonet, who will then return to Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, we will make an inquiry in Belgium to establish, if this is possible, a list of young Sinologists; the idea is to send the best of them to Peking or Hong Kong in order to allow them to perfect their Chinese to the extent that the Department receives assurances that, once their training is concluded, there will be reasonable chances that they will

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<sup>47</sup> Jacques Groothaert, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>48</sup> MFA, telegram n° 195 of 19 October 1972 sent by Jacques Groothaert ("Ambabel Peking") to Jean de Bassompierre.

<sup>49</sup> MFA, typed up account of the meeting of 6-7 April 1972.

accept entrance into the service of the State.<sup>50</sup>

Simon Leys' second book, *Ombres chinoises*, which appeared in bookstores in 1974, came two years after the end of this experience. According to Patrick Nothomb, Ambassador Groothaert had asked Ryckmans to agree to a waiting period before publishing any more books, so that the Belgian authorities would not be inconvenienced in any way.<sup>51</sup> Ryckmans himself is more laconic on the subject: "I write slowly and I had a lot of work to do."<sup>52</sup>

We can imagine the author using both his pen and a pair of scissors and glue. Sometimes an entire report is inserted after a few transformations have been made to it. For example, the one for 19 September 1972<sup>53</sup> furnished not only the basis of but also for the form for Chapter 3 ("Short Hagiographic Interlude").<sup>54</sup> The dispatch for 12 July served as the basis for a footnote.<sup>55</sup> We can add to these examples the more discreet reprises of entire phrases, recollections of definitions and sometimes old demonstrations.

For whatever reason, the manuscript was at first rejected by Gérard Lebovici, not due to any literary or ideological disagreement, but due to a legal dispute with Viénet, who had made unauthorized usage of the Champ Libre trademark to publish several Chinese-language

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<sup>50</sup> MFA, letter from Jean de Bassompierre to Gaston Jenebelly, dated 21 December 1972.

<sup>51</sup> Patrick Nothomb, interview with the author, 18 August 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Pierre Ryckmans, letter to the author dated 24 March 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Report of 3 pages dated 19 September 1972, from Patrick Nothomb to Pierre Harmel. Subject: Hagiographie – Un saint de la Chine d'aujourd'hui. Chen Tai-shan (n° 289).

<sup>54</sup> Simon Leys, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-161.

<sup>55</sup> Report of 12 July 1972, from Jacques Groothaert to Pierre Harmel. Subject: Situation et évolution politique intérieure. "Le retour de Liu Shaoqi" (n° 176). Compare with the note on p. 156 of *Ombres chinoises*.

publications in Hong Kong.<sup>56</sup> Also rejected by Editions Stock,<sup>57</sup> the manuscript of *Ombres chinoises* would finally be published by Christian Bourgois towards the end of 1974.

Following the break between René Viénet and Champ Libre, Christian Bourgois – along with Viénet and Francis Deron, who was the correspondent for the *Agence France Presse* and *Le Monde* in Peking in the 1970s – brought the adventure of the wandering collection “Bibliothèque asiatique” to 10/18, his pocket-book publishing house.

During this period, Ryckmans had the opportunity to return a third and final time to China. In 1973, he accompanied an Australian delegation of scholars who visited various research institutes.<sup>58</sup> Two years later, everything fell back into place: Jean-François Revel, reconciled with Viénet, welcomed Simon Leys to Robert Laffont, which published *Images brisées* and a reprint of *Ombres chinoises*.

Simon Leys once avowed, “a psychological phenomenon certainly manifested itself through that pseudonym.”<sup>59</sup> In his critical study of George Orwell, one finds this observation by Samuel Hynes, formulated about Rebecca West and herein applied to the author of *1984*. “When a writer chooses another name for the ‘I’ who writes, he does more than invent an pseudonym: he names and, in a certain sense, creates his imaginary identity.”<sup>60</sup>

Leys has emphasized the practical aspect of the usage of a pseudonym many times. Leaving aside his erudite work as a Sinologist, [no longer] shut away in his ivory pagoda, and descending to the public sphere to proclaim his horror of politics, Pierre once again becomes

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<sup>56</sup> Notably the translation into Chinese of the situationist pamphlet, *On the Poverty of Student Life*.

<sup>57</sup> According to Pierre Boncenne, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>58</sup> Simon Leys, *Images brisées* (1976), in *Essais sur la Chine, op. cit.*, p. 485.

<sup>59</sup> Simon Leys, “Sottises et vérités sur la Chine (entretien avec Pierre Boncenne),” in *Lire*, Paris, n° 98, November 1983, p. 24.

<sup>60</sup> Simon Leys, *Orwell ou l’horreur de la politique* (1984), Paris, Plon, 2006, p. 18.

Simon and Ryckmans becomes Leys. The builder again becomes a humble fisherman. The anonymous son of a famous family<sup>61</sup> becomes a hero in a novel.<sup>62</sup> Ryckmans once again gives birth to Leys.

During his six months in China, Ryckmans seemed to ask himself about his identity. Would Simon Leys be the author of a single book? Or by signing his real name, could he satisfy two contradictory aspects of his personality, his disgust for all secrecy and his desire to speak in public? The question has been posed, but the response will never be made.

Upon its publication, *Ombres chinoises* dazzled some and irritated others. Thirty years later, it remains a great pleasure to read. “What is the secret of the consistently pleasant expressiveness that carries these light pages along, apparently rambling, even frivolous; what is the secret of their almost poetic quality?”<sup>63</sup> Laughter, responds Miguel Abensour. Yet a smile sometimes becomes a rictus and, when Leys growls and shows his teeth, perhaps he gasps before his own reflection.

It is hot in the summer in Peking. The cultural attaché of the Belgian embassy is putting readers’ notes on the Internet. He has been the ambassador’s ghost for four months. Pierre Ryckmans enjoys total freedom of movement; he even chooses the subjects for his own written reports. But he doesn’t have the right to sign them. A writer lost in the midst of bureaucrats. At the bottom of his letter, he adds a short

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<sup>61</sup> In September 1958, Pierre Ryckmans, then 23 years old, published an article in the *Revue générale belge* that related a voyage in the Belgian Congo via hitchhiking and walking. It was signed Pierre E[tienne?] Ryckmans, out of respect for his uncle Pierre Ryckmans, former General Governor of the Belgian Congo, someone “for whom the homonymy would have been a nuisance” (letter dated 24 March 2007).

<sup>62</sup> Victor Segalen imagined an “illiterate barbarian,” a “tiny Belgian,” namely [the hero of his novel] *René Leys* (1922) after meeting Maurice Roy, a young Frenchman who expressed himself perfectly in Chinese and who claimed to have entered into the Forbidden City.

<sup>63</sup> Miguel Abensour, “Oser rire,” in *Textures*, Braine-l’Alleud – Paris, t. vii, n° 10-11, 1975, p. 47.

bibliography for the ministry's employees. He cites several works and their authors: there are "superficial but intuitive witnesses" like Alberto Moravia; "impassioned partisans" (Maria-Antonieta Macciocchi); "jokers" (the French diplomat Jean-Pierre Angremy, author of *Sac du Palais d'été* under the name Pierre-Jean Rémy); "consciousness and opportunistic polygraphs" such as Robert Guillain; etc. Among the "authors of serious analyses," there appears, next to Jacques Guillermaz and Klaus Mehnert, the name of Simon Leys.<sup>64</sup>

Elsewhere, Simon Leys recounts:

In Peking, a young European diplomat, a novice in his field, a brave man but a little naïve, believes it is fitting, in this proletarian-revolutionary capital, to replace his car with a bicycle as soon as possible. One day, he had an important meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the interpreter-factotum from his embassy surprised him at the moment that he mounted his bicycle.

'Mr. Cultural Attaché! What are you doing? Are you going to present yourself to the Minister of Foreign Affairs on a bicycle?'

Penaud, our innocent friend, recognized that that had been his intention. The interpreter-factotum, on his own authority, had the embassy's limousine brought around and, under his severe eye, the progressive cultural attaché embarked in it docilely.<sup>65</sup>

Simon Leys didn't know Pierre Ryckmans. A shadow passes, one of those "shadow-strokes without which the most luminous portraits remain deprived of depth."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> MFA, report of 21 August 1972 (n° 233).

<sup>65</sup> Simon Leys, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>66</sup> Simon Leys, *ibid.*, p. 8.