

# The Death of Simon Leys, fierce opponent of French Maoist intellectuals

By Pierre Haski<sup>1</sup>

Pierre Ryckmans, alias Simon Leys, dead this past Monday [11 August 2014] in Australia where he lived, was long considered to be a “traitor” and a “renegade” by a part of the French intelligentsia. His crime: he’d proved that “Emperor” Mao was naked and that his Western worshippers were deceiving themselves.

His book, *Les Habits neufs du président Mao*, published in 1971,<sup>2</sup> destroyed all of the myths concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

At the time, Pierre Ryckmans, a Belgian writer and teacher, a Sinologist married to a Chinese woman, lived in Hong Kong, then still a British colony and a privileged post from which to observe China. On the basis of testimonies and the close reading of texts, he came to understand the real stakes of that revolution, which was cultural in name only.

He wrote on the first page of *Les Habits neufs du président Mao*:

The ‘Cultural Revolution,’ which was revolutionary in name only and cultural only in its initial tactical pretext, was a struggle for power, conducted at the summit between a handful of individuals, behind the smokescreen of a fictitious mass movement [...] In the West, some

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<sup>1</sup> Identified as the co-founder of Rue89. Published 11 August 2014. <http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2014/08/11/mort-simon-leys-pourfendeur-intellectuels-maoistes-francais-254151>. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 17 August 2014. All footnotes are by the translator.

<sup>2</sup> *Les Habits neufs de Président Mao: chronique de la Revolution culturelle* (Champ Libre, 1971). Translated into English by Carole Appleyard and Patrick Goode as *The Chairman’s New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (St. Martin’s Press, 1997). It seems that the ex-situationist René Viénet, who was employed by Champ Libre in 1971, had a great deal to do with the publication of *Les Habits* and other books by Pierre Ryckmans/Simon Leys: “It was Viénet who discovered Simon Leys, and first published Leys’ study of *The life of Su Ren-Shen, mad rebel and painter*, and then incited him to publish *The Nine Habits of President Mao and Chinese Shadows*.” <http://www.notbored.org/vienet-radiofrance.html>.

commentators continue to completely align themselves with the official line and want to take it as the point of departure for their gloss of the concept of revolution in culture, and even revolution in civilization [as a whole] (the Chinese term *wenhua* ' allows this double interpretation). With respect to such a thrilling theme for reflection, any attempt to reduce the phenomenon to the sordid and trivial dimensions of a 'struggle for power' sounds offensive, even defamatory, to the ears of European Maoists.

As a young student involved in post-68 Maoist madness, I remember the contempt and anger that we had for the *Habits neufs*, which tried to undermine the image of the Great Helmsman. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The impact of his book, a chronicle of the Chinese events in the form of a journal, wasn't immediately felt and wasn't discouraging to the intellectuals lost along that [Maoist] road, as were Philippe Sollers, Michel Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre and so many others. On the contrary, Ryckmans was the object of a campaign that accused him of being a CIA agent, and his pseudonym was listed as a whistleblower, which barred him from returning to China.

One had to wait until 1984 for Simon Leys to make his first appearance on French television, on Bernard Pivot's show *Apostrophe*.<sup>4</sup>

In *Le studio de l'inutilité*, a collection of essays published in 2012, Simon Leys reflects on the trip to China made in April-May 1974 (three years after the publication of the *Habits neufs*) by intellectuals associated with the *Tel Quel* journal, including Roland Barthes. This was a visit, he emphasizes, that coincided with a colossal and bloody purge unleashed all over the country by the Maoist regime. Roland Barthes had published a text that had been demolished at the time by Simon Leys, but, two years later, the French intellectual's notebooks from the 1974 trip to China were published, which led Leys to once again take up his pen.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This raises an awkward question: wasn't there someone else, someone not tainted by Maoism, who could have written this obituary? This is a good indication of the seriousness of the problem of French Maoism.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. embedded link on the website indicated in footnote #1 (above).

<sup>5</sup> "Barthes et la Chine," published 4 February 2009 by La Croix: [http://www.la-croix.com/Culture/Livres-Idees/Livres/Barthes-et-la-Chine-par-Simon-Leys-NG\\_-2009-02-04-530961](http://www.la-croix.com/Culture/Livres-Idees/Livres/Barthes-et-la-Chine-par-Simon-Leys-NG_-2009-02-04-530961). According to Leys, the nation-wide purge of 1974 was "the sinisterly famous 'Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius' campaign (*pi Lin pi Kong*). [...] Upon his return, Barthes published an article in *Le Monde* that gave a curiously jovial vision of this totalitarian violence: 'Even his name, which is *Pilin-Pikong* in Chinese, rings like a joyous bell, and the campaign is divided into

“Could reading this lead us to revise our opinion?” [he asks in “Barthes et la Chine”].

Simon Leys wielded a ferocious pen. [He writes the following about Barthes in “Barthes et la Chine”:]

Has the spectacle of this immense country, terrorized and cretinized by Maoist *rhinocérite*<sup>6</sup> completely anesthetized his capacity for indignation? No, but he reserves his indignation for the denunciation of the detestable cuisine on his return flight on Air France: ‘The Air France lunch is so foul (pieces of bread the size of pears, shapeless chicken in a greasy sauce, chopped salad, starchy cream puffs – and no champagne!) *that I am on the verge of writing a letter to complain*’ (my emphasis). [...] A single line from Orwell comes to mind when thinking of the ‘Chinese’ writings of Barthes (and his friends at *Tel Quel*): ‘One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that; no ordinary man could be such a fool.’<sup>7</sup>

The Sinologist Pierre Ryckmans chose “Simon Leys” as his pseudonym as a reference to René Leys, a character in a novel by Victor Segalen, who was a French traveler in China at the end of the Nineteenth Century. This pseudonym stuck with him, even when he appeared under his real name.

But Pierre Ryckmans wasn’t only a fierce opponent to Maoism and its worshippers. He leaves behind an important body of essays, novels and works of research undertaken after he chose to settle far from the tumult, in Canberra, Australia, where he taught Chinese literature. He did much work on the sea and sea-faring people, notably publishing *Les naufragés du Batavia*, a great account of a Seventeenth Century naval tragedy.

Rewarded several times for his books or the entirety of his works, notably receiving the Renaudot Prize for essays in 2003, he was discreet, giving few interviews and limiting his public appearances.

But the message that we left us is clear and powerful: it invites us to keep

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invented games: a caricature, a poem, a sketch of children in which, quite suddenly, a little girl with made-up on attacks the ghost of Lin Biao between two ballets: the political Text (but only it) engenders these same happenings.” In 1976, this article was “reprinted in a luxury edition for the use of bibliophiles, augmented by a Postface.”

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros* (1959).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from the original English. Cf. George Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism” (May 1945).

our eyes open at all times, even when appearances are seductive.