

The Emperor Has No Clothes

Sinologist and Essayist Simon Leys (1935-2014)

Simon Leys died on 11 August 2014 in Sydney, Australia, where he lived for the final years of his life. All the major French magazines published articles or dug out old interviews. The New York Review of Books reposted online 'The Man Who Got it Right', a review of Leys' last English publication, *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays* (Black Inc. Books, 2013), in which Dutch sinologist and commentator Ian Buruma emphasises the originality and honesty of the Belgian sinologist. Most professors at Leiden whose lectures Buruma followed in the early 1970s closed their eyes to the atrocities of Mao's Cultural Revolution in China, events which Leys ruthlessly exposed.

Before he became known as Simon Leys, the man was called Pierre Ryckmans. He was born on 28 September 1935 in Brussels. The young Pierre went to Leuven to study law and history of art. As the editor of a student magazine in 1955 he unexpectedly received the opportunity to take a research trip to China with just nine other students. Fascinated by Chinese culture and frustrated by his inability to converse with ordinary Chinese people in their own language, he subsequently threw himself into the study of Chinese language, art and culture. Ryckmans spent a long time in Singapore, Taiwan and Hongkong.

In his doctorate on Chinese calligraphy (1971) Leys showed that this Chinese art was intrinsically embedded in a cosmology, the aesthetics of the brush stroke forming a component of spirituality. In his introduction to the autobiography (1966) of Shen Fu, the sixteenth-century man of letters, Ryckmans envisages the complex reality surrounding the life story of this artist, husband and father. Serious scholars, in Ryckmans' view, must know the language of the country they were studying and must have thoroughly immersed themselves in the foreign culture. To do otherwise, he felt, was to act like one of the three blind men from the Buddhist fable, each separately feeling a different part of an

elephant. The first felt the trunk, the second a leg, and the third the tail, respectively concluding that the elephant was a snake, a pillar or a broom.

In 1971, under the pseudonym Simon Leys, he wrote *The Chairman's New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (published in English by St. Martin's Press in 1978), an indictment of unseeing European intellectuals such as Sartre and Foucault, and the group based around the French magazine *Tel Quel* (Barthes, Kristéva, Sollers), who, unhindered by knowledge of the facts, supported the cruel Chinese dictator. The emperor had no clothes, as the child in Andersen's fairy tale knew all too well, but the courtiers refused to see it. The child continued to shout out this simple, honest message in *Chinese Shadows* (original 1974, English translation published by Viking Press, 1977) and *Broken Images* (original 1976, English translation published by Allison and Busby, 1979).

It was all in vain, until in 1983 Simon Leys participated in Bernard Pivot's French book programme *Apostrophes* with an Italian intellectual who had praised the Maoist Cultural Revolution in a book. Leys exploded: 'It is normal for idiots to say stupid things, as it is normal for an apple tree to grow apples and a pear tree pears, but having seen the corpses float past my house on the river day after day, I cannot accept the idyllic story of the Cultural Revolution.'

Pierre Ryckmans thus slowly shed his skin to become Simon Leys. Nomen est omen: Simon is a reference to the first name of the apostle Simon Peter. The name Leys refers to the character René Leys, the hero of Victor Segalen's eponymous novel (1921). When Ryckmans chose his pseudonym in 1971, the novel had been largely forgotten, except among a small group of literature lovers, people who had read a thing or two about China. In Segalen's novel the narrator asks the young René Leys to teach him Chinese. This elegant and mysterious son of a Belgian shipping agent seems to know all about the secrets of the Forbidden City. Leys is also the name of a famous line of painters from Antwerp, the most famous of whom was the



nineteenth-century genre painter Henri Leys. The pseudonym Ryckmans picked reveals what he saw as the constituent parts of his imagined identity: his Catholicism, his curiosity about the highly subtle Chinese civilisation, his Belgian nationality, his Flemish origins and his weakness for painting.

Another of Simon Leys' key works is his essay about the 1629 shipwreck of the Dutch merchant ship the *Batavia*, *The Wreck of the Batavia: A True Story* (originally published in 2003, English translation by Basic Books in 2005). It is an inspiring reflection on religious and political fanaticism, on terror and the way in which a society must deal with it. The fanatical leader of the mutineers has not committed murder himself. His intelligent rhetoric and moral blackmail sufficed to move others to act. 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing,' Edmund Burke would have written. Simon Leys in any case attributes this sentence to him in his collection of worldly wisdom, *Other People's Thoughts*, (original 2005, English translation 2006) dedicated to his Chinese wife Han-fang Chang. The book is also a metaphor for the way in which Leys views the perverse outbreak of violence of the French revolution, in the wake of French historian François Furet or conservative philosopher Burke.

Leys produced pioneering and erudite writing about China (also teaching on the subject at

Australian universities). He published wonderful essays about literature in the *New York Review of Books*, and in the French *Magazine Littéraire* he held forth on Nabokov and Victor Hugo, Erasmus and Multatuli, Malraux and George Orwell. He admired Orwell's integrity, commitment and common-sense thinking. He shared with the author of *1984* and *Animal Farm* an aversion to fanaticism, mendacious 'new speak' and the boasting of ostentatious intellectuals.

He loved the liberal commitment of Camus and translated Simone Weil's sharp essay on political democracy into English (*On the Abolition of All Political Parties*, Black Inc. Books, 2013). Perhaps Leys was a liberal conservative socialist in the image of Polish philosopher Leszek Kotakowski. Above all he could not stand a society which systematically bans all beauty and sophistication, his neighbour who cut down a tree because the birds kept on chirping, the pub customers who are not bothered by the noise of the radio but who protest when a Mozart clarinet quintet is played.

The tribute from the French minister of culture Aurélie Filipetti to 'the multilingual Belgian, iconoclast, anticonformist, lover of French literature and intellectual debate' was also Mozart to our ears.

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Translated by Anna Asbury