Wilbert W. W. Wong review of Philippe Paquet, *Simon Leys: Navigator between Worlds*  
(Carlton, Vic.: La Trobe University Press/Black Inc., 2017), 664 pp., HB $59.99  
ISBN 9781863959209

A senior academic at The Australian National University described Pierre Ryckmans, as soon as he learned that I was writing this book review, as quiet, but having the look of a person with a strong sense of character and determination. This was the impression that Ryckmans gave to a person who had seen him on campus but not spoken to him. Nonetheless, it was an accurate portrayal of Ryckmans, and fits in nicely with the Ryckmans (also popularly known as Simon Leys, his pen-name) that Philippe Paquet captures in *Simon Leys: Navigator between Worlds*, an impressive biography that is both scholarly and well written. This biography is a translation by Julie Rose from the original French version, which was published in 2016.

Born in Brussels on 28 September 1935, an auspicious day for a future Chinese scholar and man of letters since, as Paquet points out, it is officially the birthday of Confucius, Ryckmans grew up in a family with a strong Catholic, legal, political and colonial background. His uncle, also Pierre Ryckmans, was governor-general of the Belgian colony of Congo (1934–46) and was offered a post in the Ministry of Colonies in 1958, which he declined due to ill health. Ryckmans’s first encounter with China came in 1955, when, while studying at the Université catholique de Louvain, he joined a Belgian delegation to the country in a trip that was funded by the young communist government (pp. 74, 86). This initiative was intended to improve the regime’s image internationally, the hope being that the individuals they funded, many of whom became journalists and lecturers, would sway public and political opinion in their respective countries. During this first trip to China, he and his companions were able to have an audience with the Chinese premier and foreign minister, Zhao Enlai (1898–1976), whom he would later describe in an essay in his book *The Hall of Uselessness* as charismatic, and who ‘had a talent for telling blatant lies with angelic suavity … the kind of man who could stick a knife in your back and do it with such disarming grace that you would still feel compelled to thank him for the deed’ (p. 88). The young Ryckmans would return from China optimistic of the country’s future and its revolution (p. 79). Paquet reminds us that Ryckmans’s early enthusiasm came at a time before Maoism would produce the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and the other disastrous repressions that would discredit it (p. 79).

The trip to China proved to be a life-changing experience for Ryckmans that drove him to learn Chinese after his return, while continuing with law and art history. However, he felt that his experiences in China were limited by his inability to
converse with the locals. Wanting to take his Chinese studies further, he sensed that he needed to be immersed in the language for a long period of time to master it. With the People's Republic of China being closed at the time for political reasons, he was lucky to be able to secure a scholarship to study in Taiwan. The island proved to be an ideal training ground for the future sinologist, being a site where the great number of literary figures, artists, intellectuals and scholars fleeing the Chinese communist regime would cultivate and transmit their knowledge. It was also home to a multitude of Chinese cultural treasures and historical artefacts that were transported by the Nationalist Government during the civil war on the mainland, and where he would meet his future wife, Chang HanFang. His classmate at the National Taiwan Normal University, Lee Wen-ts’ien, would spark his interest in Shitao’s treatise of Chinese painting, which translation into French Ryckmans would later undertake as his final-year art history thesis in Louvain, and which he would pursue further in his doctoral thesis (pp. 93, 147). While in Taiwan, Ryckmans was able to gain an audience with the figurehead of the now-exiled Chinese Nationalist Government, Chiang Khai Shek (1887–1975). Unlike his earlier encounter with Chiang’s charismatic communist counterpart, Zhou, Ryckmans did not find anything remarkable and memorable about his one-hour meeting with the stoic and stiff Chiang.

After returning to Belgium to defend his final-year thesis for his art history degree, Ryckmans set out to Asia again. Through the help of the famed author Han Suyin (Rosalie Matilda Kuangchu Chou) whom he met earlier in Singapore, he managed to land himself a position as a French teacher in Nanyang University, a Chinese-based university that catered to provide higher education for the majority of the port city’s ethnically Chinese population, which she played a key role in founding. The position enabled Ryckmans to further his intellectual pursuits, taking various courses in Chinese literature. He would have gladly stayed on in Singapore but became caught up in the city’s anti-communist tide. The Chinese university during this period was treated with suspicion by the authorities and became a target of communist subversion. Of this episode, Paquet did not mince words, associating Lee Kuan Yew, ‘Singapore’s strong man’, and his ‘paranoid government’ with embodying ‘this phobia about communism’ (p. 170). Ryckmans was a subscriber of the People’s Daily. Buying the official paper of the Chinese Communist Party was not illegal in Singapore but it was frowned upon (p. 170). Students would habitually come to his apartment to read the People’s Daily until he was, one day, denounced by a mole. Although the authorities did not find anything but, as Ryckmans recounted to Paquet, ‘piles of newspapers’, he saw that his fate was sealed and was forced to leave Singapore (p. 170). Paquet, with justification, calls Ryckmans’s expulsion from Singapore ‘ironic’, given that he would later become one of the voices against the communist regime in China (p. 170). Hong Kong would be Ryckmans’s next base for furthering his intellectual pursuits and career as a Chinese expert.
During his time in Hong Kong, Ryckmans also worked with the Belgian diplomatic corps compiling information from publications in mainland China and relaying it to the embassy (1967–70). The information he obtained from this assignment provided the content for his book *The Chairman’s New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, which denounced the communist regime in China, and Maoism. The book was first published in French in 1971 (*Les habits neufs du président Mao*) under the pen-name Simon Leys, which he would continue using thereafter. The Cultural Revolution and other repressions in China shattered the earlier optimism Ryckmans had about the communist government in China. Further publications, commentaries and public engagements criticising the communist regime would follow the success of *The Chairman’s New Clothes*. Ryckmans’s political position on China, however, would cost him his friendship with Han Suyin, who was one of the supporting voices of the communist regime and Maoism, and who had earlier helped Ryckmans secure a teaching post in Nanyang University. The falling out between Han Suyin and Ryckmans, and the latter’s war of words with proponents of Maoism, which has a fair share of supporters in the free world, are among the most engaging parts of this biography.

Responding to an invitation from Professor Liu Ts’un-yan—who headed the Chinese department of The Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra—to join his department, Ryckmans and his wife decided in 1970 that it was time to move from the noisy and congested environment in Hong Kong to an environment that would be better for their four children. In his career as an academic in Australia, he would count an Australian prime minister, Kevin Rudd, as one of his distinguished students. Ryckmans was able to carry on the family tradition in the civil service, although briefly, returning to China in 1972 to work as a cultural attaché for the new Belgian Embassy in Beijing for six months. The China he saw in the 1970s, however, was a stark contrast to the China he knew in 1955, when everything seemed new, youthful and full of life (p. 279). His observations during his brief stint as a cultural attaché, and his one-month visit a year later as part of an ANU delegation, were featured in *Chinese Shadows* (1977), which was published in French in 1974 (*Ombres Chinoises*).

As a writer, Ryckmans proved to be adept at writing books that appealed to a general audience. Among the list of his literary accomplishments are the highly acclaimed *The Wreck of the Batavia and Prosper* (2005) and a historical novel, *The Death of Napoleon* (1992, published in French in 1986), that were both prize-winning publications. The popularity of *The Death of Napoleon* was such that it was translated into eight languages and adapted into an English film. Paquet highlights that Ryckmans’s familiarity with the totalitarianism of Maoist China and other similar regimes in the twentieth century inspired the writing of *The Wreck of the Batavia* (pp. 395–96, 398–99). Disheartened by the commercialisation of universities around the world, Ryckmans decided to take an early retirement from academia in
1994. The sinologist told Paquet that he made the ultimate decision after reading an internal university review in which the vice-chancellor instructed all staff to regard their students not as students but as customers (p. 440). Ryckmans would continue to make headlines as a public intellectual and writer long after he retired, being invited to give the ABC’s (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) Boyer Lectures in 1996 for which only the most eminent figures in the country are chosen (p. 448). His book, *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays* (2011), was among his last publications before his death in 2014.

Paquet makes sure that the central role of Christianity in Ryckmans’s life is well documented, as it played a key part in his life as a scholar and public intellectual. Ryckmans came from, as Paquet describes, ‘a very Catholic family’ with close family members who had served in the clergy, and as missionaries overseas (pp. 21, 32–34, 37). His uncle and godfather Monseigneur Gonzague Ryckmans, a priest and himself a Chinese scholar, inspired him to go to China, and would remain an influential figure to him after his death. Ryckmans’s religious conviction would drive him to defend the Catholic faith and the values it upholds, as much as he would engage his Maoist opponents. In the letters pages of the *New York Times Review of Books*, he sparred with the evangelical atheist author Christopher Hitchens’s attacks on Mother Teresa and, in Australia, opposed gay marriage and euthanasia.

When reading Ryckmans’s biography, the reader would be struck by the quality of Paquet’s research, made evident by the way he obtains documents and meticulously explains his sources in his endnotes. His major advantage was the cooperation and support he secured from Ryckmans, his family and his acquaintances when writing this biography, which enabled the author to secure crucial insights into Ryckmans’s life. To the historian, this biography would serve as a valuable primary source on the sinologist, given the subject’s input into this biography. Ryckmans, according to Paquet, had himself read the final draft of his book ‘as he lay in a Sydney hospital fighting the disease that would carry him off’ (p. 15). Paquet’s attention to detail, taking the trouble, for instance, to provide the history and background of the community of Servite Sisters of Mary who ran the nursery school Ryckmans went to, ensures that his readers are well informed and the book easy to follow—the reader not having to rely on internet searches for clarity (p. 39).

The book is not merely a biography of Ryckmans, but is also a collection of mini biographies of the important figures of his life: the people he had worked with, and the scholars, writers and painters he admired. Paquet also captures the histories and political scene of the regions that Ryckmans navigated to in his life, charting the history of the twentieth-century world in the process. As such, this biography is a perfect example of what microhistory can accomplish. The same level of attention is given by the author when he discusses Ryckmans’s intellectual and literary
engagements. Readers will find themselves immersed in the intellectual world of Ryckmans, exploring Chinese art and literature, and learning about the Chinese works he was translating.

Nonetheless, with all his great attention to detail, it is surprising that Pacquet does not clarify what the ‘Catholic debacle of the 1911 elections’ was when explaining Ryckmans’s grandfather’s exit as local councillor for Antwerp (1899–1901) (p. 19). This explanation would be helpful to readers outside of Western Europe who may not be familiar with the event (p. 19). Paquet also refers to Han Suyin living in Malaysia in the 1950s when the country had yet to exist, and was then only known as the Federation of Malaya (or casually as Malaya) even after the region’s independence from Britain in 1957 (p. 77). Malaysia only came into being in 1963, when the region merged with Singapore (which left the union to become a separate country in 1965), and the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak. Even if Paquet’s referring to Malaysia is intentional to make it easier for his readers to follow, as is commonly practised among scholars, he should still document the distinction as an endnote.

Rose’s excellent translation of Ryckmans’s biography into English does justice to the scholar who built his intellectual career as a translator of Chinese works into French and English and had proven adept in writing in the three languages. Her skilled interpretation fully complements the section of the book that details Ryckmans’s discussions on the art of translating and the qualities of a good translation, where he points out that the translator’s goal is to be as invisible as possible, to give the reader the illusion that he or she is reading the original (p. 128). The translator, says Ryckmans, only fails when spotted (p. 128). Rose’s translation reflects the qualities that Ryckmans saw in a translated work. Her efforts have not gone unnoticed, however, with her being the recipient of the Australian Academy of the Humanities 2018 Medal of Excellence for her work on Ryckmans’s biography.¹

Paquet sets a benchmark for scholars and writers on how a historical and intellectual biography can be done that is both scholarly and engaging. The skilled translation by Rose ensures that the broader English-speaking audience is able to enjoy and appreciate the quality of Paquet’s masterpiece as well as making certain that the story of Ryckmans, one of Australia’s greatest public intellectuals and sinologists, gets told in Australia, his adopted home and final resting place. The book’s length of about 600 pages may seem overlong for some readers and reviewers, but the length is necessary to accommodate the approach that Paquet uses to comprehensively document the life of Ryckmans and the world he lived in, which future scholars would certainly appreciate. The title of his biography is fitting for someone who loved the sea and had spent a significant portion of his life navigating between worlds.
