

René Viénet: An Autobiographical Sketch¹

René Viénet was a member of the Situationist International (SI) from 1963 to 1971. He was one of the SI's two filmmakers, though his films were made and released after he'd left the group. But his footprint goes much beyond the few youthful years he spent in this organization, as he explained in a 2015 interview with Daoud Boughezala for *Causeur* and in an earlier two-hour-long radio conversation with Hélène Hazera, which are his only authorized recollections so far.

Viénet has supplied most of the details, read and approved the present tombstone.

He was born on 6 February 1944 to a family that had been dockworkers for several generations in Le Havre, France. He lived in Le Havre until he moved to Paris to study Chinese with Jacques Pimpaneau, an extraordinarily productive scholar, with whom he's remained close friends ever since. Viénet's film *Mao by Mao* (1977) is "dedicated to Jacques Pimpaneau."

From October to March 1965, Viénet briefly taught French at Nanjing University in China. Upon his return to France, he translated Harold Isaacs' *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* into French for Editions Gallimard. This book had a lasting influence on him; in 1974, in Hong Kong, he reprinted an early and forgotten Chinese translation of it using lead type.

From 1967 to 1978, Viénet was employed by the CNRS (*Centre national de la recherche scientifique*). Based at Paris University 7, in Jussieu, he established a library devoted to modern Chinese history and literature and set up the only library of Chinese films outside of China (all of these films, which he collected in Hong Kong with Chan HingHo and Françoise Zylberberg, were later transferred to the Taipei Film Library).

Viénet was also the publisher of a wandering book series called "*Bibliothèque asiatique*." Many of its 50-plus titles, including Pierre Ryckmans' *Su RenShan, Painter Rebel and Madman*, various bilingual books and some catalogues for the Bibliothèque nationale de France were published by a kind of non-profit coop.

Just a handful of titles were published by Floriana and Gérard Lébovici's Champ libre (Simon Leys' *Les habits neufs du Président Mao* and Chinese translations of Mustapha Khayati's situationist classic, *On the Poverty of Student Life*, Luo MengCe's *Confucius* and Harold Isaacs' *Tragedy*). This arrangement was interrupted when Guy Debord convinced Lébovici to not publish any more books by Leys (including *Chinese Shadows*, which was then at the page-proof stage). These titles then ended up at the Plon publishing house 10-18 and were later reprinted at Viénet's initiative by Jean-François Revel at Laffont.

The "*Bibliothèque asiatique*" series also published bilingual (French and Chinese) book-length editions of famous texts by Wei JingSheng and the Li YiZhe group, never before available outside of China.

¹ In February-March 2020, René Viénet provided the basic text for this autobiography, which was then thoroughly proofread and copyedited by NOT BORED! Viénet has chosen not to use the most recent version of it (the one that appears here). There is a version of this text uploaded to the "Career" section of the Wikipedia entry on Viénet:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/René_Viénet; it is riddled with typos, bad grammar and inconsistent formatting. It doesn't credit NOT BORED! for any of the work done on this text, which is fine with us: it is a mess and as such thus offers an accurate reflection of the subject in question.

Viénet has the distinction of being fired *twice* by his colleagues at the CNRS (the second time for good) because he'd been the publisher of all of Leys' books and *Révo. cul dans la Chine pop.*, a notorious collection of first-hand documents written by Red Guards, edited by Chan HingHo, who supervised the translation into French by a team of young students, and introduced by Viénet, who coined the slang title *Révo. cul.* (ass), which became the customary phrase in French for the *révolution culturelle*. Viénet's enemies, the Catholic-Maoists then in control of French Asian Studies, also took offense to the anti-Ms. Maoist thrust of his film, *Peking Duck Soup* (*Chinois, encore un effort pour être révolutionnaires*), which was his major undertaking.

Confronted with the film's financial failure and the resolute hostility of French academics (the same ones who made sure that Leys/Ryckmans would never teach in France), Viénet elected in 1979 to move to Asia, where, over the course the next 30 years, he became a successful business representative. In 1982, he brokered a 20-year-long enriched-uranium contract for the Taiwan Power Company, meeting one-third of its fuel needs for its six reactors, an episode that was discussed in an article in the February 2020 issue of the *Question Chine* newsletter (picturesque details of dogfights with some French officials included).² Ever since he was young, Viénet has been in favor of nuclear energy and has had contempt for the illusions of subsidized wind-power, which he believes is the best ally of polluting fossil-fuel-generated electricity.

Among his many other business achievements, he has worked in the medical field, where he initiated and launched emergency contraception products in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and conducted clinical trials in Taiwan that led to the market authorization on the island of RU486 (mifepristone), which allows for the interruption of early pregnancy and is a medicinal alternative to surgical abortion. For a few years and at a very low price, he also produced in Taiwan a generic misoprostol, which is the necessary complement to mifepristone for medicinal IoEP. Trademarked by Viénet, "GyMiso" was allowed in France, then the rest of Europe, where it saved money for various medicare systems because privately practicing doctors could use it, not just inside hospitals, where the Cyotec brand had been used. In France today, *RU486 + GyMiso IoEP regimen + two doctor visits* (refunded at the rate of 200-plus €) is practically free of charge for women.

More recently, Viénet has been looking for partners to launch free-of-charge emergency contraception that is based on a 10 mg micro-dose of mifepristone, which is patent-free, side-effect-free, well-known, proven to be the best alternative, and in fact very cheap to produce (in Vietnam, for example, the public retail-price of Mf10mg in pharmacies is under 50 U.S. cents per dose). It remains to be seen whether Viénet can succeed against the fat cats of contraception, who sell ersatz Mf (ulipristal acetate) at 100 times that price.

In 2003, Viénet founded éditions René Viénet, which has published books not welcomed by regular publishers, such as O. Blanc's biography of Marie-Olympe de Gouges (eventually a successful title) and French translations of George H. Kerr's *Formosa Betrayed* and Peng MingMin's *Taste of Freedom* (less successful).

Viénet has supplied to the ChuanZheng XueTang Museum at MaWei in the Min River estuary, downstream FuZhou, a huge trove of rare historical documents (including many rare photos) about Prosper Giquel (1835-1886), the French naval officer who played a key role in the early modernization of China, but who saw his technical French- and English-speaking university, established in 1866, and the related shipyard at Pagoda Anchorage, destroyed in August 1884 by Admiral Courbet, acting upon orders from Jules Ferry.

² <https://www.questionchine.net/la-france-et-l-electro-nucleaire-a-taiwan>

In 2007, Viénet became the editor of the French journal *Monde chinois*. He successfully brought out four issues (numbers 11, 12-13 and 14) in a dense new design. In 2008, the fourth one, number 14, was pulped immediately after printing by the journal's owner (a Mr. Lorot) because he sought to erase the publication of an article by Francis Deron about the slaughters committed by the Khmers Rouges in Cambodia and during the (anti)Cultural (counter)Revolution in China. Deron and Viénet sued Lorot, who had published a new number 14 that didn't include Deron's article in it, and won.

In 2015, Nicole Brenez offered Viénet *carte blanche* at the Cinémathèque française. As a follow-up, Viénet's four films have been screened at several film festivals almost 50 years after they were made. This gave him the opportunity to get back to the original negatives and deliver fresh digital files (in several languages) that could replace the versions found on the internet, which are abundant but very poor technically.

Mr. Viénet is said to be interested in directing a film about the French Revolution that would dissolve many of the myths and lies told about it by Stalinist historians.

A note about the films

Between 1969 and 1972, Viénet discovered and fell in love with the contemporary cinema of Hong Kong and older Chinese classics. Over the years, he brokered over 100 films, which he distributed to markets in Europe, the French West Indies and French-speaking Africa.

His first two releases in Paris (offered in candid translation) were

Du sang chez les taoïstes 殺戒 *ShaJie*

and

Les félons d'AnTchai 路客與刀客 *LuKe Yu DaoKe*.

Then he repurposed:

1973: *La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques ?* (first with subtitles, then dubbed by Gerard Cohen along with the original repurposed subtitles by Viénet);

1974: *Une petite culotte pour l'été (Les Filles de Kamare)*.

Viénet directed two more elaborate and personal films:

1976: *Mao par lui-même (Mao by Mao, 毛澤東獨白)*, which was the French entry for short film at the 1977 Cannes Film Festival, but first seen on French TV when Mao passed away on 9 September 1976.

1977: *Chinois, encore un effort pour être révolutionnaires (Peking Duck Soup, 他們辦事, 老百姓不放心)*, which was the French entry in *Directors Fortnight* at the 1977 Cannes Film Festival.

Both films were produced simultaneously in French and English with the close collaboration of Viénet's long-time friend, translator Donald Nicholson-Smith.

The English version of *Mao by Mao* uses the voice of Jack Belden. The Yiddish version uses the voice of Moishe Zylberberg and the Cantonese version uses the voice of Li KamFung. In the French version, the voiceover is by Viénet.

The voice-over in French in *Chinois ...* is by Jacques Pimpaneau and Thierry Lévy is used for the Li YiZhe part.

For these two films, which were produced by Hélène Vager and Charles-Henri Favrod, Viénet worked with two assistants: Francis Deron (under a last-minute pen-name because he had just been recruited by the AFP to be a correspondent in BeiJing), and Wu XingMing, aka Ji QingMing (pen name for a PRC citizen living in France). The editing team was Noun Serra, Monique Clementi, Bertrand Renaudineau and Franck Vager. The sound engineer was Dominique Hennequin. The Cannes Film Festival selection was engineered by Pierre Rissient.

In 2019, Keith Sanborn was invited by Viénet to refresh his earlier American subtitling of *Can Dialectics break bricks?* Ever since then, Sanborn's American version has been the basis for other subtitled versions, such as the Carlos Prieto version screened at Ficunam in Mexico, Madrid, etc.

To view the trailers for these films, visit Vimeo:
<https://vimeo.com/user86652794>