

# The Tribulations of a French Woman in China: An Interview with Mariana Otero

Diogenes  
2018, Vol. 62(1) 141–143  
Copyright © ICPHS 2017  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0392192117735433  
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



## Brigitte Rollet

Institut d'études politiques (Sciences-Po), CHCSC-UVSQ, Paris, France

In November 2014, Mariana Otero, the French director of a number of remarkable and acclaimed documentary films including *Histoire d'un secret* [History of a Secret] (2003), *Entre nos mains* [Into our own hands] (2010) and *À Ciel ouvert* [Like an Open Sky] (2014)<sup>(1)</sup>, was one of the French woman directors invited to the China Women's Film Festival in Beijing. The theme of the current issue of *Diogenes* and the recurring topic of film distribution in the various articles inspired me to ask her to share her experience there. It is worth noting straight away that in the last few years there has been a growing trend for more film events in East Asian countries, both of festivals of films by women and of LGBT/Q\* festivals. This trend has also been discussed by Loist (2013), who also contributed to this volume of *Diogenes*.

### *What was your experience of Beijing?*

It was incredible. I didn't enter my film in the competition. They heard of my work through the Creteil International Festival of Women's Films.<sup>2</sup> I agreed straight away to take part. The idea of meeting a Chinese audience delighted me.

### *Who is behind this festival?*

This festival is run by an NGO based in Beijing called the Crossroads Centre (crossroadsbeijing.weebly.com). This NGO was founded in 2003 by Li Dan, its director (at that time, it was called the *Dongjen Centre for Human Rights Education*). It has two employees and more than ten volunteers/interns.

### *In France, one doesn't necessarily associate China with this sort of initiative. Can you tell us a bit more about this?*

The NGO was founded following the contaminated blood scandal in Henan, in which thousands of people were infected with HIV. It was founded to help in the fight against AIDS and to raise awareness in China of the problems associated with the epidemic. Over the years, it has expanded the focus of its activities to include issues involving minorities who suffer from discrimination or marginalisation and to raise the awareness of human rights in China.

---

### **Corresponding author:**

Brigitte Rollet, Institut d'études politiques (Sciences-Po), CHCSC-UVSQ, Centre d'histoire culturelle des sociétés contemporaines (CHCSC), 47 Boulevard Vauban, 78047 Guyancourt Cedex, France  
Email: [brigitte.rollet@uvsq.fr](mailto:brigitte.rollet@uvsq.fr)

*What activities does this NGO organise?*

The Crossroads Centre organises conferences, debates, exhibitions, film screenings and film festivals on various themes such as the rights of women, the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transsexual) community, ethnic minorities, AIDS sufferers, disabled people etc. These events attract varying amounts of attention depending on the theme of the event.

*How do these events maintain their financial viability in a country where there is, no doubt, very little support for this type of initiative?*

The NGO has a number of partners in China and in other countries: embassies, cultural organisations (the Institut français), universities (Tsinghua, The Communication University of China, etc.), NGOs, international organisations (UN Women), companies (DKT International Beijing), film festivals (including Cineffable<sup>3</sup>), theatres, cinemas, libraries, cafés etc.

Financial support is provided by various sources including the French and US embassies, *Aids Fonds*, the *National Endowment for Democracy*, the Delegation of the European Union to China and DKT International Beijing, a social enterprise.

*Please tell us a bit more about the China Women's Film Festival. How long has it been running and how long does it last?*

The *China Women's Film Festival* (cwff.net) was first run in 2013. In September 2014 it received the 2nd prize in the *Intercultural Achievement Award*, assigned by the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Vienna.

The festival runs for a week. The festival shows Chinese and foreign films, both feature-length and short, fiction and documentary, animated films, experimental films etc., and runs in Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an and Tianjin. More than 30 films are screened. Conferences/debates and discussions with women directors, feminists, academics also take place.

*It was on this basis that you took part?*

Two of my films were screened at the Institut français and in a theatre with a projection room: *Entre nos mains* and *À ciel ouvert* (both with Chinese subtitles). There was a relatively large audience of about 60 people. And I would say that, for the Chinese viewers, these films answered some questions and led to some intense reflection. It was very moving. The welcome I received from the volunteers and the organising team was also quite remarkable. Rarely have I been so well received at a festival and I've rarely felt that cinema could play such an important role.

*Which other French films were screened alongside yours?*

Two of Claire Simon's films were shown in her presence (*Les bureaux de Dieu* [God's Offices], 2008, and *Gare du Nord*, 2014). In both cases she took part in a discussion with the audience after the screening. Céline Sciamma's first full length film, *Naissance des pieuvres* [Water Lilies] (2007) was also shown twice (the second time at the Institut français).

*Please give us your impression of the audience ...*

The people within this NGO, and also in the public which supports it, are really motivated, engaged and interested in both the art of film-making and the social or ethical issues raised by the films.

*Do you know of any other festivals organised by this NGO?*

It also organises another film festival, the *Beijing Queer Film Festival* (bjqff.com) which was first presented in 2001. Over the years, this festival has become international with films and invited guests from other countries as well as China and it also cooperates with film festivals in other

countries (Brazil, Belgium, Italy, France, Denmark). This year, this biennial festival's screenings will take place over four months and not just a week so that its impact will be greater and the risk of enforced cancellation will be reduced.

*Are there other similar festivals in China?*

This festival is the only one in China providing a public platform for films and discussion about issues of sexuality and gender. It takes place in a difficult social and political environment. The organisers have to confront many obstacles.

Translated from the French by Mandy Hewett

## Notes

- 1 A graduate (1988) of the IDHEC – Institut des hautes études cinématographiques, Mariana Otero also directed *Cette télévision est la vôtre* [It's your television too] about Portuguese television (1997) and *La Loi du collège* [The of Law of the School] (1994).
- 2 Founded in 1979, the Creteil Festival of Women's Films (filmsdefemmes.com) is the most long-standing festival of its type. It took over from the Musidora Festival which, in 1974, was the first festival to be dedicated solely to women directors – a ground-breaking event in France in an era when other minority film festivals were beginning to appear in mainland France.
- 3 *Cineffable* is an international lesbian and feminist film festival, open only to women, first held in Paris in 1989. Initially called 'Quand les lesbiennes se font leur cinéma [When lesbians make their own films]', it aims to promote films (full-length or short, fiction or documentary) on issues of gender and sexuality: see [cineffable.fr/fr/edito.htm](http://cineffable.fr/fr/edito.htm).

## References

- Loist S (2013) The queer film festival phenomenon in a global historical perspective (the 1970s–2000s). In: A Fléchet, P Göttschel, P Hidiroglou, S Jacotot, C Moine and J Verlainne (eds) *Une histoire des festivals : XX<sup>e</sup>–XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 109–121. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.

