To attain the quality of art was always my inspiration, and I very much hoped that film audience would regard my documentaries as art. Unfortunately, some urban audiences consistently dismissed them as propagandistic and subjective. I was frustrated by these comments until I came across a statement by the Czech animator Jan Svankmajer who opened his new film *Sileni* with the following lines: ‘This is not a work of art. Today, art is all but dead.’ Today, art is reduced to advertisements.

Indeed, over time, not only can art degenerate into commodity, many people can also lose the ability to appreciate it. They are more receptive to entertainment than any messages the filmmaker and people from the villages might try to communicate. It becomes difficult to distinguish between what has been propagandized and what has been censored when people have long been unable to enjoy their right to access information—they mistake propaganda for truth, and dismiss what is outside the scope of propaganda as lies. When I show audiences what they do not usually see, they say that my camera is so subjective—yes, it quite often appears in my films and the villagers carried the tripod like my crew—that it exaggerates reality, embellishing my ideals. They blame me for interviewing only villagers but not the government; only victims but not the police, and presenting only one-sided voice as a result. Consequently my films are criticized for not being ‘as objective as CCTV’, which, the urban audiences assume, neutrally shows what has happened by involving different voices.

I do not want to comment on the techniques of my films, as people do not believe that they have any. I will focus on propaganda. In another astute comment, Svankmajer reflected: ‘My film is indeed propaganda. So what? Do you think that I am not able to make propaganda?’

I want to add: why are we not allowed to propagandize the other side? In particular, why do people always call it propaganda whenever there is a message from the marginalized group? Is propaganda a privilege?

Just as I focused on certain subjects in my academic research, I also select particular issues when I film. I decide to work on a film after I have identified there is a problem, and my aim is to support and provoke change. When I made these films, I worked from the vantage point of the ordinary people, though it made me vulnerable to similar treatment. The authorities neither understood nor supported me, after I had taken the side of the villagers or forced to relocate households groups, and quite often they made it impossible for me to interview any officials. I was even detained at one point: a group of young police officers interrogated me, and I fully understood the
he expects the Chinese to subserviently kiss his hand and thank him for his doles. 17

What Larsen had learned in China continued to inform his life and work. His career journey might be epitomized in the words of the Baptist missionary Earl H. Cressy, describing the transformative effect of China: “He had gone out to change the East, and was returning, himself a changed man . . . The conversion of the missionary by the Far East results in his being not only a missionary but an internationalist, an intermediary between the two civilizations that inherit the Earth.” 18

Endnotes
1 Van W. Symons, former Executive Director of ASIANetwork, wrote a paper on this college in 1989, titled “A Failed College: The Abortive Attempt by the Lutheran Church of China to Establish a College at Yiyang, Hunan Between 1923-1931.”

2 He uses the phrase “cocksure Missiourianism” in Norwegian in a letter to his father of Jan. 28, 1913 and our “cocksureness” in English in a typescript he wrote in response to a request to account for his theology, titled “What Do I Believe and Teach?” 28 February 1925, 5. Both documents are in the Nikolai Astrup Larsen papers in the Luther College Archives, Decorah, Iowa (hereafter cited as NAL-LCA). The contents of the NAL papers are described in Archie R. Crouch and others, Christianity in China: A Scholar’s Guide to China Mission Resources in the Libraries and Archives of the United States (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1989), 130-31.

3 The letter of dismissal denied that his humanism was a cause for dismissal, but Treadup identifies it as the essential cause. See John Hersey, The Call (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 551.

4 In 1932 Pearl S. Buck denounced the aim of Chinese missions when she admitted that Confucius meant as much to her as Jesus Christ. Pressured to assure her mission board “that nothing has clouded your conviction of our Lord Jesus Christ,” she declined to do so and resigned from her position in the Presbyterian mission. See Lian Xi, The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907-1932 (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 120-24.

5 NAL to Lauritz Larsen, 28 April 1916, NAL-LCA.

6 NAL to Lauritz Larsen, 13 December 1917, Nikolai Astrup Larsen papers in the Lutheran Seminary Archives, St. Paul, Minnesota (hereafter cited as NAL-LSA).

7 NAL to Lauritz Larsen, April 28, 1916, NAL-LCA.


9 NAL to Lauritz Larsen, 13 December 1917, NAL-LSA.

10 H.G. Stub to NAL, 24 December 1924, NAL-LCA. Stub was the president of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America and wrote NAL in Norwegian. The crucial request was stated as follows: “[L]a mig faa en udredning av Deres helte teologiske standpunkt.” On heresy hunting in other Protestant missions in China during 1924, see Lian Xi, 217.


12 Lian Xi, 188.

13 Edward Svik, “Thoughts on How to Meet the New Movements that Confront Us,” Lutheran Church Herald 10 (1 June 1926): 686-690, continued in 10 (8 June 1926): 716-717.

14 Svik, 686.

15 Svik, 716.

16 NAL, “Our Relation to the N.C.C.,” (holograph manuscript of an address probably delivered at a church meeting in China, n.d. [1926?]), 32 pp., NAL-LSA.

17 NAL in Hankow to J. R. Birkeland in Minneapolis, 17 March 1927, NAL-LSA.