

RESEARCH OF NOTE

Director's commentary on the China HIV documentary, *Care and Love*

On Film, not as Art but as Propaganda —and as Agent for Change

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Editors' Note: Dr. Ai Xiaoming, Professor of Women's Studies and documentary filmmaker from Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, was one of the keynote speakers at the 2008 ASIANetwork Conference. Her keynote address follows on p. 9. This article, written as a commentary on her important film, *Care and Love*, describes her evolving view on the role of documentary in China, based on her experiences shooting and directing a movie on a controversial subject.

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?'

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I have been a scholar and professor for many years before joining the community of independent filmmakers.



Ai Xiaoming during her 2008 ASIANetwork Conference keynote address. (Photo by Marsha Smith)

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

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“spirit of compromise” with nationalistic and anti-Christian movements. Instead of preaching the Word and emphasizing the salvation of souls, “liberal thought” has substituted “social and economic uplift. Is it strange that with such training the young Chinese Church is turning Bolshevistic?”¹⁵

Though Larsen does not name him, he quotes directly from the Søvik’s article. The NCC’s attention to economic and social concerns, he argued, is easily justified, since Christianity that is not applied in daily life is “incomplete,” a “caricature.” “How,” Larsen asked, “can one have lived a few years among the Chinese and not have felt that it is just social and economic conditions,—the intellectually, spiritually, and morally dulling influence of grinding poverty . . . which keeps countless numbers from Christ?”¹⁶

The political turmoil reached a crisis in early 1927, when most missionaries in the interior of China left among them Larsen and his family. Among the various reasons why Larsen never returned, was his sense that prospects for advancing Christianity through the efforts of foreign missionaries had eroded significantly. Most if not all of the missionaries, he believed, should return home because the current dangers signaled the end of an era:

This is going to be much more than a mere political revolution. It is going to profoundly influence the whole relation between foreigners and Chinese . . . There will be no room hereafter for the autocratic missionary, the “benevolent despot” who comes with a purseful of money . . . while

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 great civilizations that inherit the Earth.”¹⁸

Endnotes

¹Van 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.”

²He 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.

³The 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.

⁴In 1932 Pearl S. Buck denounced the aim of conversion as a worthy goal, and in 1933 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.

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

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

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

⁸NAL, “The Lutheran Synod Mission,” in Ekeland, T. and others, eds. *White Unto Harvest: A Survey of Lutheran United Mission: The China Mission of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Board of Foreign Missions, 1919), 50.

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

¹⁰H.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 udrødning av Deres hele teologiske standpunkt.” On heresy hunting in other Protestant missions in China during 1924, see Lian Xi, 217.

¹¹NAL, “The National Christian Council of China,” *Lutheran Church Herald* 9 (11 August 1925): 1004.

¹²Lian Xi, 188.

¹³Edward Søvik, “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.

¹⁴Søvik, 686.

¹⁵Søvik, 716.

¹⁶NAL, “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.

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

¹⁸Earl H. Cressy, qtd. in Notto R. Thelle, “Changed by the East: Notes on Missionary Communication and Transformation.” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. 30.3 (July 2006): 115.

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meaning of humiliation. On the other hand, the people I interviewed became my real crew, they welcomed me quickly as one of them, and were willing to work with me for the program as their voice. They always believed that my films would bring their sufferings of injustice to the authorities, make their appeal heard by the public, and eventually help resolve their problems. I have a clear project: I work with those issues and make documentaries in order to join their effort for the change—a consequence is that I am not neutral at all. My role and my documentaries are inevitably regarded with suspicion.

As it is now, although the urban audiences are sceptical of such documentaries and accuse them of being too propagandistic, the local authorities realize immediately that such kind of “propaganda” should not be circulated. Coincidentally, the head of the local Propaganda Bureau, who knows perfectly well the power of propaganda, is the sister of the head of the local hospital documented in the film where the HIV-contaminated blood bank caused so many villagers to contract AIDS. Unsurprisingly, the local government officials have made their way to mobilize the villagers to

prevent the screening of the film. I very much hope to maintain a friendly relationship with the local government, but at the same time I cannot betray the villagers. I also think that in a society where care and love are so rare, why should *Care and Love* be forbidden? I sincerely hope that more people will see this film and ask themselves the question: under such fatal circumstances, what actions should one expect to be taken by the villagers, the government, and the judges?

I repeat: do not regard the film as a work of art. It does nothing but raise questions and call for solutions.