Dying For Faith, Transforming Memories: Chinese Christian Martyr Watchman Nee (1903–1972)

为信仰而死，转变的记忆：中国基督教殉道者倪柝声（1903－1972）

Joseph Lee Tse-Hei 李榭熙

Abstract

Martyrdom is an integral part of the narrative of all three monotheistic religions. This article draws on the story of Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng 倪柝声, 1903–1972) to investigate the meaning of martyrdom in Chinese Protestant Christianity. When countries in East Asia developed into centralized nation-states, some of the governments often perceived Christianity as subversive and mobilized official resources to marginalize, persecute and destroy indigenous Christian communities. Watchman Nee, who founded an indigenous Protestant movement in the early 20th century, was arrested in 1952 and died in a labour camp in 1972. His story reveals his consistent efforts to invoke Christian transcendental ideas against the state's antireligious measures and to recast the traumatic experience of persecution as a spiritual struggle. Even in the most depressing circumstances, he formed new networks among cellmates for mutual support. His defiance against the state outside and inside the prison walls has greatly shaped the dynamics of Chinese church-state relations today, and Protestants worldwide often refer to martyrs like Watchman Nee to develop new paradigms for negotiating with anti-Christian forces.

MARTYRDOM AS AN ANALYTICAL LENS

This article explores the martyrdom of Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng 倪柝声, 1903–1972), who founded the Christian Assembly (*jidutu juhuichu* 基督徒聚会处), also called the Little Flock (*xiaoqun* 小群), a homegrown Protestant movement in modern China. An influential Chinese church leader, Nee was arrested in 1952 and died in a labour camp in 1972. His tragic story recasts the church-state conflict as a spiritual and moral struggle, healing the emotional wounds of persecuted Christians and inspiring them to defend their faith.

Thematically, the martyrdom of Watchman Nee highlights the complexity of memory production in China. The Reform Era saw a flood of personal memoirs recalling persecution and hardship suffered during the Cultural Revolution, including Rae Yang's reflection on her experience as a Red Guard and

Harry Wu's moving account of his suffering in a labour camp (Yang 1998; Wu and Wakeman 1994). These memoirs, widely known collectively as the wounded literature (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学), provided a vehicle for healing the psychological scars associated with political turmoil. With a similar emphasis on trauma in the Maoist period (1949–1976), the narratives of Chinese Christian martyrs, such as Watchman Nee's, reveal both the lived experience of individual believers and their ongoing resistance against a totalitarian state. As with other marginalised groups, Chinese Christians are determined to reclaim their own voices long sub-merged under the official Communist historiography of Western imperialism. When they interpret the memory of prison ordeals, they transform it from a period of bitter suffering into a unique experience of survival and try to extract theological insights for spiritual consolation. They delve into their traumatic past to seek new meanings about self and nation, and about the role of Christianity in a socialist state. While many countries have launched truth and reconciliation commissions to address the aftermaths of regime transition, these Christian reflections offer a unique Chinese perspective on the differences between pluralistic and repressive approaches toward truth telling.[1]

With respect to primary sources, the Chinese national, provincial and municipal bureaus of public security have not yet released the dossier of Watchman Nee. This study has had to rely on accounts given by his cellmate Wu Youqi (吴友琦). Such eyewitness accounts must be used with great caution (Wu, 2014). The accounts are problematic in their hagiography, portraying Watchman Nee as a remarkable example of those church leaders who refused to compromise with the anti-Christian officials and sacrificed themselves for the faith. Their acts of defiance displayed an absolute obedience to God rather than to Chairman Mao. This image of victorious enthronement and vindication over the Communist rulers represented the triumph of the spirit over the flesh, and established that martyrdom, as part of the imitation of Christ's Passion, was obligatory and fundamental to Christianity. Beginning with an overview of Watchman Nee's life, however, this article explores his own understanding of martyrdom before 1949. Then, it discusses a range of theological resources that he employed to sustain himself inside the prison and labour camps, and transnational mechanisms that the Little Flock members use to keep his memories alive.

> On the day of his death, Nee allegedly left a note under a pillow. The note, which his niece later found among his belongings, said, "Christ is the Son of God who died for the redemption of sinners and resurrected [sic] after three days. This is the greatest truth in the universe. I die because of my belief in Christ."

THE STORY OF WATCHMAN NEE

Born in 1903, Watchman Nee grew up in a third-generation Anglican family. While studying at the Anglican-run Trinity College in Fuzhou in 1920, he underwent an emotional conversion at a meeting held by Dora Yu (1873–1931), who had conducted revival gatherings among Chinese Protestants during the 1900s and 1910s, and founded a Bible Study and Prayer House in Shanghai to teach women evangelistic skills. Upon his conversion, Nee left the Anglican school for Shanghai and worked with Dora Yu. At the age of 17, in 1920, he decided to become a full-time evangelist. In 1923, he went to study the Bible with Margaret E. Barber (1860–1930). An Anglican missionary from England, Barber came to Fuzhou in 1899 and taught in a mission school

1 Examples from Germany, South Africa and South Korea show that the pursuit of transitional justice entails more than judicial procedure (Welsh, 2006; Hanley, 2016; Kesselring, 2016). These countries launched truth and reconciliation commissions to investigate previous cases of human rights violations in order to consolidate the reestablished rule of law and educate future generations about historical injustices.

for seven years before returning home. In 1911, the year the Qing dynasty was overthrown, Barber, influenced by the Brethren Movement, returned to China to found a Bible school southeast of Fuzhou. She also introduced Nee to the ideas and organization of the Exclusive Brethren.

The spread of Biblical primitivism complemented the growth of the Little Flock. Nee subscribed to John Nelson Darby's (1800–1882) theory of dispensationalism, by which human history is divided into separate periods, each of which represents a different stage in God's salvation plan. Inspired by two tenets of dispensationalism, the empowering of the Holy Spirit and strict adherence to the Bible, Nee drew on the Brethren's writings to articulate his ecclesiology. Dissatisfied with the hierarchy that he saw in the Anglican Church and other denominations, he rejected the pastoral office because he felt that the status of priesthood obstructed believers' communion with God. Calling for a return to primitive Christianity, Nee urged Christians to serve as a spiritual body of Christ, and to break away from missionary control. He implemented plural eldership, disavowed the clergy-laity distinction, and organized worship around the Lord's Supper (Lee, 2005; Woodbridge, 2019).

Combining Biblical primitivism with modern business practices and printing techniques, Nee attracted affluent and educated followers in the coastal cities, and the Little Flock quickly expanded into every corner of the country. So many Chinese Christians left their denominations to join the Little Flock, that the Protestant missionaries in Fuzhou often accused the Little Flock of "stealing sheep." By 1949 the Little Flock was estimated to have as many as 70,000 followers. The Communist authorities viewed the rapid development of the Little Flock with suspicion and plotted against Watchman Nee. In 1950, the Communists mobilized Chinese Protestants to support the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Initially, many Little Flock leaders, including Nee, thought that the Communist attitude towards Protestantism, as expressed in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, was one of cooperation rather than confrontation. But seeing the Communists' policies to expel foreign missionaries and interfere with the spiritual affairs of the church after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, they boycotted the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The government then turned against Watchman Nee in order to undermine his credibility and control the Little Flock from within. In 1952, Nee was put in a detention centre. In 1956, he was given a fifteen-year sentence and taken to Shanghai's Tilanqiao (提篮桥) Prison, where Catholic Bishop Ignatius Gong, Jesuit priest George Bernard Wong, other Little Flock leaders, and female dissident Lin Zhao were held (Mariani, 2011; Lee, 2017; Lian, 2018).

During the mid-1950s, the prison supervisors recognized Nee's bilingual skills and assigned him to translate technical manuals from English into Chinese rather than doing manual work. This was a common practice, as the state utilised those prisoners with bilingual knowledge to work on specific projects. As time passed, Nee was appointed by the prison authorities as a team leader in his cellblock, supervising inmates to complete daily work quotas. Even though this favourable treatment could be taken away from him at any time, such privileges made him a special prisoner, protected from harassment by violent convicts. In 1960, Nee met and befriended a cellmate, Wu Youqi. In late 1969, both were sent to a labour camp in northern Anhui Province. Nee was subject to regular public humiliations in the camp. Despite the hostility, Nee shared with Wu his life stories and Biblical knowledge. The conversations inspired Wu to take Christianity seriously. On one occasion, Nee urged Wu to get in touch with other Little Flock Christians once he was released from the camp. While their friendship grew stronger, Nee's health deteriorated, as he suffered from a heart ailment and a chronic stomach disorder. Nee died alone in his cell on May 30, 1972, at the age of sixty-nine. On the day of his death, Nee allegedly left a note under a pillow. The note, which his niece later found among his belongings, said,

> Christ is the Son of God who died for the redemption of sinners and resurrected [*sic*] after three days. This is the greatest truth in the universe. I die because of my

belief in Christ (Wu, 2004, p.143).

The note left by Nee was smuggled out of China in the mid-1970s, and it was hailed by his followers as a profound theological statement from a dying martyr. No one could have imagined that thirty-two years later, Nee's last words would be published, revealing his unreserved devotion to the Christian God. In that painful and lonely moment, he embraced a martyr's death and came to grips with his suffering.

This does not mean that He did not have the power to reform the political system or to save the Jewish nation. [Our Lord's] goal on earth was to save sinners. His work was spiritual, not worldly; it had nothing to do with politics…. We should not fall prey to political agendas. Our purpose on earth is to advance God's heavenly kingdom. (*Collected Works of Watchman Nee*)

WATCHMAN NEE ON MARTYRDOM

In the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant traditions, martyrdom is held as the highest form of faith, manifested through self-sacrificial acts to witness personal faith even unto death. Martyrdom is praised for its generative and inspirational effects among Christians. Martyrs do not just die; they motivate their contemporaries and future generations to follow Jesus Christ. Watchman Nee conducted two leadership training sessions in Guling in Fujian Province to address the subject of martyrdom among his followers in late 1948 and early 1949. According to historian Paul Chang (2015), the theology of Watchman Nee embodies "a millenarian vision of the spiritual victory over the evils and trials of the world through identification with Christ's death and, for those who thereby are the victors or 'overcomers,' (*desheng de* 得勝的) to be with God and Christ in the timeless New Jerusalem." He also aptly points out that, "Ethics and practice stand at the heart of their [Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's] theological systems, and even this basic emphasis can be considered broadly Chinese, in its preference for the practical over the speculative" (Chang, 2015).

When framing a martyrdom narrative, Nee referred to the account of Smyrna's Christians in Revelation 2, and argued that any torture could be overcome because at the end time, the "crown of life" would be given to those who endure, and there would be a vindication for the sufferers. Nee wrote,

> Whenever a believer faces persecution, he has to take heed to the Lord's word, be faithful unto death, and be ready to sacrifice his very life. The Lord's requirement is nothing less than our very life ("Martyrdom, Chapter 51," *Collected Works of Watchman Nee*).

Aware of the intensity of anti-Christian persecution, beginning with verbal abuse, and followed by torture and imprisonment, Nee asserted that martyrdom constituted an integral part of the cosmological battle between God and Satan. During the leadership training sessions, he abstained from attacking the Communists and reiterated a position of political non-engagement:

> When our Lord was on the earth, He maintained His position wherever He went. He never acted as a law enforcer. He never tried to enforce any law, whether civil or criminal. … Our Lord never touched politics. When He was on the earth, many Jews were ready to die for Him if He would only agree to be their king. But the Lord would not be their king. This does not mean that He did not have the power to reform the political system or to save the Jewish nation. His goal on earth was to save sinners. His work was spiritual, not worldly; it had nothing to do

> with politics…. We should not fall prey to political agendas. Our purpose on earth is to advance God's heavenly kingdom ("A Christian and his country, Chapter 49," *Collected Works of Watchman Nee*).

Nothing in his remarks suggests that Christians should oppose the government, even when faced with the threat of persecution and death. He considered martyrdom to be a Christian way of life, and stated that with the spirit of martyrdom, dying for Christ was part of daily discipleship. When news of Watchman Nee's death came to churches in Hong Kong and Britain in 1972, overseas Chinese and British Christians decided to translate his spiritual writings and keep alive his legacy. In 1973, Angus Kinnear published the famous biography, *Against the Tides: The Story of Watchman Nee*, to recall and preserve the history of this spiritual giant.

LESSONS FOR CONTEMPLATION

For Chinese Christians of all theological stripes, the Maoist state had nothing to offer but trouble. Despite its secular orientation, Maoism displayed many of the trappings of a religion, with a well-developed theology, demanding unconditional loyalty from citizens and refusing to come to terms with Christianity. Charged with the task of remoulding Christian prisoners into new socialist citizens, the Communist prison regime relied on harsh and brutal interrogation techniques to reshape the prisoners' religious commitment into an absolute devotion to the state. Watchman Nee could do nothing to change the hostile reality, but his Christian piety instilled a spirit of dissent, giving him a theological framework to carve out a limited mental space for spiritual empowerment. Embracing the practice of contemplative solitude, he secured a sacred moment of silence in order to focus intensely on God. Observing this devotional practice embodies a sense of self-denial, surrendering one's ambitions and welcoming the presence of God to reside in one's soul. This experience highlights the characteristics of a historically grounded spirituality that emerged in China as a theology of defiance or a gospel of suffering. Nee went through an incremental process of appreciating the essence of being a faithful Christian in a time of persecution.

The circulation of the story of Watchman Nee's martyrdom contributes to a better understanding of historical reflection within the Chinese churches. According to Elizabeth A. Castelli (2004), the brutality of religious persecution must be infused with new insights so that readers can appreciate the moral lessons of martyrdom. Therefore, the contest over whose sense of justice will prevail lies at the centre of the discussion. While the Chinese churches see martyrologies as spiritual commentaries in line with the exhortation of Christ, their way of reading martyrdom depends upon changing circumstances. As memories of the political campaigns in the Maoist period fade, most of the surviving religious prisoners have refrained from attacking the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Yet, the unregistered congregations still oppose the state's intervention into the spiritual affairs of the church. Remembering the experience of persecution is the most important means by which Christians commemorate those martyrs and events that inspired them. The content of the suffering narrative may change in time, but the knowledge of a resurrected faith in this narrative remains unchanged.

In the final analysis, the story of Watchman Nee challenges us to explore new modes of reimagining hopeless situations, without losing sight of the violence of persecution, and to broaden our view of the limited options available to the Christian faithful in China. Even though Nee had no intention of challenging the single party-state system, his efforts embodied elements of religious defiance and called on people to follow their consciences, thereby giving us rich resources for historical reflection i n the n ew century.

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Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, Director of the Global Asia Institute, Pace University, USA

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