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Faith and Defiance

Christian Prisoners in Maoist China

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Abstract

The persecution of Chinese Christians after the outbreak of the Korean War raised important questions about faith and politics in a state-centric society. This article examines the experience and memory of three Protestant religious prisoners in the Maoist era: Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng 倪柝声), who founded the Christian Assembly (*jidutu juhuichu* 基督徒聚会处) or Little Flock (*xiaoqun* 小群) in early twentieth-century China; Epaphras Wu (Wu Weizun 吳维僔), an active Little Flock member; and Robert Huang (Huang Zhaojian 黃兆坚), who organized Seventh-Day Adventist activities in 1950s Shanghai. The persecution stories of these religious leaders entered Chinese Christian hagiography, providing Chinese Christians with a shared cultural resource that transcended denominational and theological differences. Central to my investigation are questions about how Christians reacted to Maoism, how they came to terms with the traumatizing experience of incarceration as part of a broader life struggle, and how Chinese churches made sense of these persecution narratives to assert their faith and agency. A closer look at the history of these religious prisoners enables us to capture faith-based resistance at an individual level, and to contextualize the particularities of each persecution in the Maoist period.

Keywords

Christian hagiography – martyrdom – religious prisoners – Seventh-Day Adventists – Watchman Nee

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信仰与反抗：毛泽东统治时期的基督徒囚犯

摘要

朝鲜战争爆发之后，对基督徒的迫害在中国这样一个国家主导的社会里是一个严重的信仰与政治问题。本文探究了毛泽东时代三位基督新教徒囚犯的经历与回忆。第一位是倪柝声，二十世纪早期中国基督徒聚会处或小群的创始人；吴维僔，一位活跃的小群信徒；以及黄兆坚，50年代上海基督复临安息日会活动的组织者。这三位基督徒领袖受迫害的故事纳入了中国基督徒的圣人史，为中国基督徒提供了超越宗派神学差异的共享文化资源。本文的核心问题是，这些基督徒如何应对毛泽东思想，他们如何忍受漫长的囚禁生涯，以及中国教会如何理解这些事迹以维护其信仰与教会。深入分析这些被囚基督徒的历史能帮助我们捕捉个人层面以信仰为根基的反抗，以及理解毛时期每个逼迫案例的独特性。

关键词

基督徒圣人传记，殉道，宗教囚犯，基督复临安息日会，倪柝声

Introduction

The experience and memory of injustices such as racial discrimination, colonial exploitation, and religious persecution often provide powerful resources for faith-based activism. This is especially true for the Chinese church today. The persecution of Catholics and Protestants after the outbreak of the Korean War raised important questions about faith and politics in a state-centric society. While the 1950s was a period of suppression and contraction for Christianity in China, there has been a tendency in the West to associate Chinese Christians with severe persecution, and to exaggerate the conflicts between state-controlled patriotic churches and unregistered congregations (Lim 2013; Lee and Chow 2016).

One cannot understand the complexity of church-state relations in contemporary China without appreciating the impact of religious persecution on individual Christians and congregations. In this journal issue, both Paul Mariani and I discuss how socialist transformation bore heavily on Christians in the early years of the People's Republic of China. Central to my investigation of religious prisoners are questions about how Christians reacted to Maoism,

how they came to terms with the traumatizing experience of incarceration as part of a broader life struggle, and how Chinese churches made sense of these persecution accounts to assert their faith and agency. The findings and insights throw light on the transformation of Christianity from a mistrusted and persecuted religion into a fast-growing and fully indigenized spiritual movement.

This article presents three case studies of Christian religious prisoners in the Maoist era. These church leaders have entered Chinese Christian hagiography, and their spiritual stories are framed in a way reminiscent of the heroic narratives of Communist revolutionaries. These hagiographical materials have been influential in certain Chinese church circles during the post-Maoist period. This study explores how the hagiography of Christian prisoners is constructed and used for the purpose of religious propagation and faith building. The first prisoner is Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng 倪柝声), who founded the Christian Assembly (*jidutu juhuichu* 基督徒聚会处), or Little Flock (*xiaoqun* 小群), an indigenous Protestant movement in twentieth-century China, and who was arrested in 1952 and died in a labor camp in 1972. The second victim is Epaphras Wu (Wu Weizun 吴维僔), who followed the Little Flock in Shanghai and was imprisoned from 1964 to 1987. The third is Robert Huang (Huang Zhaojian 黄兆坚), who organized clandestine Seventh-Day Adventist activities in Shanghai during the 1950s and was jailed from 1964 to 1972. After the death of Watchman Nee, the highly indigenized Little Flock Christians sought to portray their spiritual leader as one of the key pillars of the unregistered house churches. Although Epaphras Wu and Robert Huang were not in the same rank as Watchman Nee, they survived imprisonment and participated directly in their own mythmaking by producing autobiographical narratives. It was through the writing process that they made the best of their experiences of incarceration and turned their humiliation into pride. By demonstrating how Wu and Huang put themselves on the same footing as national church figures like Watchman Nee and Wang Mingdao, their autobiographies reveal their efforts to resist the state's anti-religious measures and to recast their traumatic past as a spiritual struggle.

These stories bear the mark of the turbulent era in which the prisoners lived, and shift the analytical focus from Communist anti-religious actions to their devastating impacts on individuals. Far from abandoning their faith, these religious prisoners turned to it for support during incarceration and invoked Christian transcendental ideas to resist the state's atheistic propaganda. Even in the most depressing circumstances, they formed new networks among cellmates for mutual support. Their defiance of the state inside prison walls and

their critiques of the inequities pervasive in the Maoist period have inspired contemporary Christians to be aware of the gap between the state's pronouncements of socialist harmony and the harsh reality of autocratic rule (Chao and Chong 1997; Harvey 2002; Aikman 2003; Liao 2011; Chow 2016). A closer look at the persecution narratives enables us to capture faith-based resistance at an individual level, and to contextualize the particularities of each persecution experience.

Furthermore, the testimonies of Christian prisoners highlight the complexity of memory production in China. Autobiography is a major mode of constructing historical memory. This literary genre dates back to early imperial times as a way of promoting state-sanctioned Confucian values through personal example. With the rise of nationalism in the May Fourth period, intellectuals used autobiography to attach the individual self to the collective national body. This was exactly what Hu Shi called the "little self" under the "big self" (Fromm 2012; Zhang 2013). The Maoist state remolded the autobiographical genre by subordinating the autonomous self to state mobilization. One example of this genre was the Lei Feng story, which represented the concerted effort by the Maoist state to promote absolute loyalty and altruistic sacrifice among citizens in the 1960s (Reed 1995). But 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 struggle in a labor camp (Yang 1998; Wu and Wakeman 1994; Mazur 1997; 1999). These memoirs, though published in English in the West, provided an outlet for healing psychological scars associated with political turmoil. With a similar emphasis on recent trauma, the testimonies of religious prisoners reveal both the lived experience of individual Christians and their ongoing struggles with an atheistic regime.

As did other marginalized groups studied by Jun Jing, Yan Yunxiang, and Martin Fromm, Chinese Christians reclaimed alternative histories long submerged under the dominant official historiography of Western imperialism (Jing 1996; Yan 2003; Fromm 2012). They delved into their traumatic past to seek new truths about self and nation, and about the role of a patriotic Christian in a socialist state. Although China has not followed in the footsteps of other countries by launching truth and reconciliation commissions that address the painful effects of political upheavals on citizens, these Chinese Christian memoirs offer a unique perspective on the differences between pluralistic and repressive approaches toward truth-telling (Schick-Chen and Lipinsky 2012).

The official dossiers on the three Christian prisoners have not yet been released by the different provincial and municipal bureaus of public security. This limits our knowledge of their everyday struggles during incarceration.

Tensions and conflicts with the Communist government also drove the Little Flock Christians and Seventh-Day Adventists underground throughout the Maoist era (Lee and Chow 2016). Although both denominations resumed their activities openly when China was opened to the outside world in 1978, some of their members remained critical of the state-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Bureau of Religious Affairs. The contentious relationship with the state has made it difficult for Chinese and foreign researchers to access the files on these three prisoners and their affiliated churches in local government archives.

It is indeed difficult to piece together thorough accounts of these church leaders during imprisonment. There are many biographical works on Watchman Nee written by Christians abroad, and both Epaphras Wu and Robert Huang published their autobiographies. These writings, however, which are aimed at Chinese churches critical of Communist religious policy, are highly problematic because they emphasize the saintly character of these church leaders without addressing the larger context in which they interacted with the Maoist government.

With respect to Communist religious persecution, this study relies on a declassified public security report on Watchman Nee and several official accusation accounts against the Seventh-Day Adventists in the mid-1950s. It was possible to access these materials at the municipal archives in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shantou throughout the 1990s and 2000s, but recent archival regulations have restricted public access to these primary sources. One should note that the archival system of the Maoist state was a powerful instrument of control used by the Bureau of Public Security in major political purges. The accusation materials against the Little Flock Christians and Seventh-Day Adventists are no exception: they were compiled to provide Communist officials with adequate information to destroy these Christian communities. They included highly controversial evidence about "political crimes" of Little Flock and Adventist church leaders. The political nature of the public security report presents a methodological problem for historical research. Written in the orthodox Maoist discourse and intended for Communist Party officials in charge of public security and religious affairs, the accusation materials characterized these Christian prisoners as "counterrevolutionaries," "reactionary forces," and "class enemies." Communist authorities, however, applied these accusatory terms to both Christians and non-Christians to justify their persecution by all available means, including state violence. The indiscriminate use of these terms is just one example of the anti-Christian biases that color the official sources.

Similarly, the Christian testimonies are hagiographical at first sight, portraying the prisoners as moral exemplars who refused to compromise with

the anti-Christian officials and sacrificed themselves for the faith in times of persecution. Described in a tone of eager anticipation, their acts of defiance displayed their absolute obedience to God rather than to Chairman Mao. This image of a victorious enthronement and vindication over Communist rulers represented the triumph of the soul over the flesh and established that martyrdom, as part of the imitation of Christ's passion, was obligatory and fundamental to Christianity.

Such romantic representations, often constructed in a stronger rhetoric that expressed the hope of martyrdom, were reminiscent of the heroic stories of Communist revolutionaries, which also shared a progressive linear narrative. The latest research by Chloë Starr highlights an affinity between these Christian narratives of saints and Communist heroic stories (Starr 2017). The translation of the Bible and the proliferation of Christian printed materials in the early twentieth century made an impact on modern Chinese literary and political writings that were produced after the May Fourth era (Lee and Chow 2015; Mak 2017). Hagiographies of Chinese Christian prisoners and Communist heroes resemble each other thematically, honoring extraordinary individuals who overcame selfishness and decided to sacrifice themselves for a true cause (O'Collins 1977). Framed in a sentimental tone, these accounts are primarily used for the purposes of faith consolidation and ideological propaganda. When Epaphras Wu and Robert Huang recalled their stories decades later, they documented the dignity with which they pursued various survival strategies inside prisons and labor camps, their determination to draw upon Christian spiritual resources to sustain themselves, and their adaptability in the face of persecution. This pedagogical function is similar to the Confucian literati's practice of reflecting on behaviors and virtues and recalls as well the use of translated biblical stories and missionaries' portraits of saints to inculcate Christian values (Clark 2011; Keenan 2011; Starr 2008: 25).

Nevertheless, these methodological problems are not sufficient reasons for rejecting the official materials and Christian testimonies completely. For one thing, the Communist state has not released all the archival materials concerning these imprisoned church leaders. The accusation materials give us valuable information about the operations of Little Flock Christians and Seventh-Day Adventists, especially their organizational structure and nationwide networks, as well as their criticisms of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. These details cannot be found in any other sources, and it was these very features that aroused state suspicion toward this tiny fraction of the Christian population. Moreover, the Christian testimonies should not be seen as a mere reflection of past individual experiences; they were written to assert the agency of Christian survivors in a politicized society and to critique the Communist policy of

imprisonment (Pillemer 2006; Chow 2013). Nevertheless, the narratives highlight the dynamics of human interactions inside the prison walls, the formation of collective religious identity, and changes in theological orientation in times of crisis. In particular, Watchman Nee and Robert Huang praised their families and inmates for sustaining them, and this revealed the importance of social relationships (*guanxi* 关系) as the basic building block of their struggles.

Beginning with a critique of the Maoist policy of imprisonment, this article examines a range of resources that Christian prisoners employed to protect themselves in the netherworld of prisons and labor camps. Because Christianity instilled some elements of dissent among these prisoners, their beliefs and experiences were bound together in a set of spiritual, family, and peer relationships. Even though the prisoners' efforts to reinvent themselves and rework their lives did not subvert the ideological values and norms of the Communist state, their limited agency entailed a sense of historical and religious consciousness. Their Christian upbringing taught them to value piety over politics, and to avoid internalizing the culture of intrigue, class struggle, and betrayal. They relied on multiple social positions to construct a space for the survival of their ideas and faith practices in a hostile society. Their struggles exhibited different approaches toward survival and remembrance during the darkest moment of the Maoist era.

The Maoist System of Imprisonment

After 1949, Chinese Christians faced a new reality, as they came under the rule of a powerful Communist state that was willing to intervene in the spiritual affairs of the church. During the 1950s and 1960s, the state launched the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (*sanzi aiguo yundong* 三自愛國運動), a united front designed to infiltrate Christian institutions and to co-opt the autonomous Protestant denominations into the socialist order. The term "Three-Self," coined in the nineteenth century by Rufus Anderson (1796–1880) of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and Henry Venn (1796–1873) of the Church Missionary Society, refers to a mission policy that organized native Christians in Africa and Asia into self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating churches. When the Communists rose to power in 1949, the state embellished the "Three-Self" slogan with "Patriotic Movement," and applied the new political category "patriotic" to many extant Christian bodies. On the surface, the movement called for the ecclesiastical autonomy of Chinese churches, but its core goal was to force Christians to sever their institutional ties with foreign missionary enterprises. In addition, the Communists founded

a number of patriotic religious associations as part of a complex bureaucratic mechanism to regulate Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Taoist, and Muslim activities and control their doctrines (Ying 2014).

The outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, was a turning point in church-state relations, as the war led to the state's expulsion of foreign missionaries from China. The expulsion was a calculated political tactic; it was nationalistic and symbolized the end of foreign imperialism in China (Ling 1999). The fervent ideology opposing US military intervention in Korea drove people to become anti-foreign. Wartime propaganda and psychological manipulations by the state convinced many Christians that the days of missionaries' service were over (Jones 1962: 49–50).

Meanwhile, the imposition of ideological dominance eliminated the possibility of gray areas. It was not just that Christians needed to denounce their missionary supervisors and distance themselves from the global church. Worse still, the only acceptable worldview was the atheistic socialism of Maoist ideology. When the state projected itself as the absolute embodiment of the national will and demanded total submission from Christians, it crushed any alternative views on church-state relations (Seligman and Weller 2012: 66). What might have angered the Christians more than the suspension of their ties with foreign missionaries was to see Communist triumphs displayed not merely as ideological propaganda but as religious devotion. All Chinese, including Christians, had to undergo an incessant indoctrination campaign, and learned to immerse themselves in the discourse of a socialist collectivity. The ultimate goal was to replace their old faith and beliefs with a deep devotion to the party-state that promised them well-being and liberation on earth (Gentile 2006: 7–8, 123–124). Resistance against the state's socialist discourse and anti-religious policies was therefore punished with detention and imprisonment.

The large-scale imprisonments that occurred in the Maoist period constituted a traumatizing experience for Christian prisoners. Imprisonment was a powerful mechanism of control by which the state enforced its ideological values and behavioral norms among Catholics and Protestants. Klaus Mühlhahn estimates that 10 percent of China's population, approximately fifty million persons, were condemned as counterrevolutionaries and interned in the 1950s and 1960s, and that half of them served lengthy terms in labor camps for political re-education (*laogai* 劳改). Tragically, millions of people perished in the camps due to starvation and overwork, especially during the Great Famine (1959–1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1967–1976) (Mühlhahn 2006; 2009). Deng Xiaoping's government rejected the excesses of Maoist ideology and redressed three million cases of false accusation (*yuanjia cuo'an* 冤假错案)

in 1980 (Schick-Chen 2012: 18). But as many as half a million Catholics and Protestants are estimated to have died from persecution between 1950 and 1978, and the scale of family breakdown and the consequences it had for the children of all the prisoners, including Christians, is unimaginable (Lian 2010: 204).

During the 1950s, the state distinguished between church leaders with strong ties to foreign missionaries and overseas Chinese and those without. It set up special case-examination groups against prominent church leaders like Watchman Nee, Wang Mingdao 王明道, Shanghai bishop Ignatius Pinmei Gong (Pin-Mei Kung 龚品梅), Canton bishop Dominic Yiming Deng (Yee-Ming Tang 邓以明), and Jesuit priest George Bernard Wong (Cook 2007; Devaux and Wong 2000; Tang 1991). The examination groups questioned the apprehended individuals, identified any subversive remarks in their writings, and forwarded the investigation results to all levels of the party and government officials. The arrested Christians faced prolonged interrogation at secret detention centers or prisons. They were charged with fabricated crimes and told to write confessions, then the examination groups determined the sentence and transferred the accused to prisons or labor camps (Mühlhahn 2009: 191–192).

In 1955, the Communists arrested Fernand Lacretelle, the highest-ranking Jesuit priest in Shanghai, and tortured him at Lujiawan prison. They eventually broke his resistance and used his confession to intimidate a cohort of Chinese priests into denouncing Bishop Ignatius Gong (Mariani 2011: 157–162). The judicial procedure was treated as a political matter, and the behaviors of suspects were thought to be related to their political attitudes and class backgrounds. Since political factors were involved in the judicial process, the rule of law never existed and there was no impartiality whatsoever. Once the Christians were locked up, they entered a brutalizing world that they could hardly imagine. In a prison cell where dozens of strangers were caged like animals, there was friction between inmates. Worse still, prisoners competed daily for scarce resources of food and physical space, and there was abuse and fighting inside the cells. The purpose of the entire setup was to divide and rule, isolating prisoners from one another and breaking any unity (Mühlhahn 2009: 259–260).

The Story of Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee (1903–1972) was probably the most influential Chinese Protestant preacher in the early twentieth century. Born in 1903, Watchman Nee grew up in a third-generation Anglican family. While studying at the Anglican-run Fuzhou Trinity College in 1920, Nee underwent an emotional conversion

experience and decided to become a full-time evangelist. Under the influence of Brethren ideas, Watchman Nee rejected the hierarchy that he saw in the Catholic Church and most of the Protestant denominations. He urged Chinese Christians to develop a strong laity and to break away from their dependence on Western missionary enterprises for doctrinal instruction and administrative support. He saw a church or an assembly as "a spiritual body" composed of a group of Christians who were called out of this world to follow Jesus Christ—a concept derived from his interpretation of the book of Acts in the New Testament (Lee 2005).

Strongly in favor of autonomous and independent churches, Watchman Nee emphasized the necessity to maintain independent local churches, because on a doctrinal level a local church could serve as a guardian of Christian teaching. He saw no religious or practical reason for a group of Christians to divide themselves into different denominations. What he sought to promote was a locally autonomous and nondenominational church independent of any external control. Throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, Nee encouraged Christians to break away from the well-established denominational churches to join the Little Flock Movement. By 1949 the Little Flock was estimated to have as many as seventy thousand followers (Lian 2010; Lee 2005).

The Communists viewed the rapid development of the Little Flock with suspicion. In 1950, the state mobilized Chinese Protestants to support the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and to denounce any American imperialist elements inside the church. The purpose was to co-opt Protestant leaders and assimilate the church into the state. This top-down strategy of co-option demanded political identification with the Maoist state. In affirming their Christian identity, the Little Flock congregants were divided between preaching the divine against Maoism and collaborating with the state to ensure stability.

Initially, many Little Flock leaders, including Watchman Nee, thought that the Communist formula for Protestantism as expressed in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was one of cooperation rather than one of confrontation, and that there should be much room for peaceful coexistence with the Communists. Their optimism toward the new regime drove them to participate in the accusation meeting against American imperialism. When they realized that the Communists were attempting to interfere with the spiritual affairs of the church and politicizing the religious sphere, they spoke out against 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 (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Gong'anbu Diyiju 1955: 14–18).

In September 1951, four Little Flock members in the Nanjing Assembly denounced Watchman Nee as a reactionary. In response, Nee launched a

counter-denunciation campaign and disciplined those pro-government Little Flock members. But in 1952 he was arrested and put in a detention center. In 1956 he was charged with a series of crimes against the state and given a fifteen-year sentence. He was immediately taken to Shanghai's Tilanqiao 提篮桥 Prison and transferred to a labor camp in 1969 (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Gong'anbu Diyiju 1955: 14–15; Lee 2005).

Founded by the British in 1903 as Ward Road Gaol in Shanghai's Hongkou district, Tilanqiao Prison was taken over by the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Public Security in 1951. It was one of the notorious prisons where presumably many high-profile prisoners and church leaders like Catholic bishop Ignatius Gong, Jesuit priest George Bernard Wong, and other Little Flock leaders were held at the time. Historian Silas Wu consulted an unpublished memoir of Wu Youqi 吳友琦, one of Nee's cellmates, and records of interviews to reconstruct the years of Watchman Nee's life under imprisonment. The following account of the prison episode of Nee's life is based on the recollections of Wu Youqi (Wu 2004).

Shortly after Watchman Nee was transferred to Tilanqiao Prison, the prison authorities launched several mass trials against him, but they failed in their attempts to force him to denounce his faith. In the mid-1950s, the prison supervisors recognized his bilingual skills and assigned him to translate the latest technical manuals from English into Chinese rather than doing manual work, the usual task of inmates. Such assignments were common in the use of labor as a tool of reform, as each prisoner's field of specialization was noted in his file. The state utilized prisoners with bilingual skills and technical knowledge to work on specific projects (Wu 1992: 76), and many Western-educated Christian prisoners, such as David Lin 林大卫 of the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Chaozhou-speaking Baptists and Presbyterians in Guangdong Province, were assigned to perform technical translation for the state. This arrangement could be understood as special treatment for these well-educated religious prisoners, who were exempt from hard labor.

As time passed, Nee was appointed by the prison authorities as a team leader in his cell, supervising inmates to ensure that they completed all daily work quotas and participated in thought reform. The appointment made him a special prisoner in the eyes of his inmates. His translation work and his supervisory role earned him slightly better treatment. In times of food shortages, he was unlikely to suffer from hardship or die from starvation. Even though these favorable conditions could be revoked anytime, such privileges gave him a little power and protected him from harassment by violent convicts.

According to Wu Youqi, Nee never abused his status as a team leader to gain additional favors. He kept a low profile, revealed little about himself to

strangers, and remained neutral in rivalries among the prisoners. He tried to stay on good terms with prison officials and inmates alike. He took care of the weak, including a mentally handicapped inmate, and counseled those in great distress. Wu observed that Nee's generosity earned him the trust and respect of other prisoners (Wu 2004: 68–70).

The ordeal of Wu Youqi began in 1960 when he was interrogated and incarcerated on false charges of insulting Mao Zedong and opposing the socialist state. After spending three years in a detention center, Wu was assigned to the same prison cell as Watchman Nee. Initially Wu was suspicious of Nee, the team leader of the cell, but a display of compassion by Nee changed Wu's impression of him. Wu Youqi's wife, a teacher, was pressured by the government to divorce her imprisoned husband and accuse him of being a counterrevolutionary. She refused to do so and was fired from her school. When she visited Wu in prison, she told him of her difficulties. She also complained about being harassed by the guards during monthly visits. This upset Wu deeply. He was so depressed that he yelled and cried inside the cell, a serious violation of prison regulations (Wu 2004: 70–72).

Wu Youqi wrote that after this incident, Nee showed great sympathy for him. Whenever Nee led the political study sessions (*xuexihui* 学习会), he instructed Wu to praise the good Communist policies instituted after 1949 in order to win favors from the prison authorities (Wu 2004: 72). The study sessions were intended for the study of Maoism. Through a political ritual of self and group criticisms, participants were supposed to demonstrate attitudinal and behavioral changes in service to the Communist state (Whyte 1974: 5–6; Kiely 2014: 282–283). These sessions required inmates to collectively read and debate articles from the *People's Daily*, selected quotations from Mao Zedong, and speeches by other party leaders. Prison officials were usually absent. Without any official supervision, many inmates sat quietly and said little. Watchman even asked Wu to be his personal secretary, documenting the daily work progress of the cellmates and taking notes on the political study meetings and criticism sessions (Mühlhahn 2009: 259; Wu 2004: 67–72). Wu admitted that he was deeply moved by Nee's compassion and expressed an interest in Christianity (Wu 2004: 111–117). Evidently, Nee identified Wu as a potential convert and applied the strategy of proselytization in a prison setting.

While helping Wu to cope with hardship in prison, Nee faced troubles of his own. His wife, Charity Zhang Pinhui 張品蕙, suffered serious health problems and completely relied on Nee's sisters for support (Lin 2017: 192–193). Before the Cultural Revolution, the Nee sisters often accompanied Charity to visit Nee every month, bringing him medicine and necessities (Wu 2004: 74). During the Cultural Revolution, Charity was often humiliated and brutalized by the Red Guards. As Wu Youqi recalled, the prison authorities organized a public

accusation against Nee in 1965 and proclaimed that if he gave up his faith, they would release him so that he could be with his sick wife. As a devoutly conscientious believer, however, Nee did not give in (Wu 2004: 73–79).

In late 1969, Nee and Wu were sent to a labor camp in the mountainous terrain of northern Anhui Province. The treatment there was worse than in Tilanqiao Prison. Nee was subjected to regular public trials and humiliations. Despite the hostility, Wu remained close to Nee. Whenever they were together, Nee shared with Wu his life stories and biblical knowledge. The conversations inspired Wu to take Christianity seriously (Wu 2004: 129).

As their friendship grew stronger, Nee's health deteriorated; he suffered from a heart ailment and a chronic stomach disorder. He died on May 30, 1972, at the age of sixty-nine. Before his death, Nee apparently left a note under his pillow. When his niece came to collect his belongings, she found the note:

> Christ is the Son of God who died for the redemption of sinners and resurrected after three days. This is the greatest truth in the universe. I die because of my belief in Christ.
>
> WU 2004: 141–144

The published official report on the Little Flock Christians and Wu Youqi's testimony suggest that the purge against Watchman Nee was steeped in political discourse and revealed the increasing politicization of the Chinese church. Because of his opposition to the state's intervention into the spiritual affairs of the church, Nee was arrested in 1952 and remained behind bars for two decades. 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 (Wu 2004: 143).

Although Nee did not participate in his own mythmaking, his imprisonment and eventual death in the labor camp provided an ideal template for a Christian martyr story. Elizabeth Castelli argues that the appeal of religious martyrs is based not just on the lived experience of specific historical figures, but on the narratives and legends that are told about them by subsequent generations (Castelli 2004). As memories of Maoist religious persecution faded away in the reform era, the Little Flock Christians were keen to mythicize Watchman Nee, portraying him as a spiritual giant who put the Christian God above secular authority and subjected the latter to the spiritual judgment of the divine. They drew on Wu Youqi's testimony to narrate Nee's prison life and romanticized his martyrdom in an emotionally intense language. They also translated and published Nee's writings, showing that in a painful and lonely moment he embraced a martyr's death in the labor camp and gained a transcendental understanding of his fate.

The Story of Epaphras Wu

Epaphras Weizun Wu (1926–2002) differed from Watchman Nee in that he took control of the mythicization of his prison experience. Epaphras's testimony expressed his willingness to embrace suffering for the faith, and it was presented in a subjective and often dramatic manner. As this is the only primary source on Wu available to historians, it is difficult to fill in all the gaps concerning his daily struggles during incarceration and his interactions with prison officials and cellmates. Nevertheless, his narrative reveals the strategies of resistance adopted by some Christian prisoners.

Epaphras Wu was two decades younger than Watchman Nee. He was born in 1926 into a Methodist family in Songjiang, eighteen kilometers southwest of Shanghai. After he experienced an emotional conversion in May 1941, he imposed a strict discipline on himself, rejected idolatry, and refused to bow to the portraits of national leaders. He finished high school at the end of the Sino-Japanese War and returned to teach at his alma mater, Songjiang's Wesley school. In 1946, he entered the China Bible Seminary in Shanghai, a theologically conservative school founded by Ruth M. Brittain in 1930 to train church workers that upheld the supreme authority of the Bible, a supernatural Christology, and the importance of repentance and rebirth in the conversionary process. Many of the graduates, including Epaphras, operated outside the Western missionaries' supervision and crossed denominational lines in their ministry. In early 1949, Epaphras was an intern pastor at the Christian Missionary Alliance–affiliated Shouzhen Church 守真堂 in Shanghai. After the Communists took over the city in May, he became a physics instructor at Shouzhen High School and joined the Little Flock Movement at Nanyang Road (Doyle n.d.).

In 1950, the Communists co-opted the Little Flock into the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Epaphras typified many well-intentioned Christians who focused on spiritual matters and stayed away from politics. He disagreed with the initial decision of the Little Flock leaders, including Watchman Nee, to cooperate with the state. When the Little Flock Christians attended the accusation meeting against American imperialism at their Nanyang Road Assembly, they were shocked by the anti-religious rhetoric. According to Julia C. Strauss, these accusation gatherings were carefully staged to accomplish three objectives at once: "crushing individuals, striking fear into the hearts of their sympathizers, and soliciting the chorus like participation of the masses" (Strauss 2007: 53). Through the interactive, participatory spectacle of the accusation meeting, the Three-Self leaders sought to force the church "to vicariously participate in the state's imposed terror and collectively reaffirm its popular legitimacy" (Strauss 2007: 53). Instead of accusing fellow Christians, Epaphras and many Little

Flock members criticized the Communist religious policies (Wu 2002: 88–113). By then, it no longer mattered whether the Little Flock supported or opposed the Three-Self leaders because either way, they were embroiled in politics.

Epaphras Wu admitted that after the arrest of Watchman Nee in 1952, he kept a low profile and remained critical of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. He wrote about a trip to Beijing in 1957, where he met Wang Mingdao, who had just been released after his first arrest. Epaphras allegedly encouraged Wang to be as courageous as Samson in the Old Testament (Wu 2002: 148). By associating himself with Wang Mingdao, Epaphras sought to show that he rejected the Three-Self patriotic leadership from the very beginning. His activities put him at odds with the government, and in December 1957 he was sent to a village north of Tianjin for correctional labor. Two years later, he was transferred to a factory in northeastern Tianjin. Because he proselytized among local workers, he was accused of propagating superstition and subjected to thought reform. In late 1961, he was permitted to return to Tianjin and was assigned to serve as a middle-school laboratory assistant. He re-established contacts with house churches in Tianjin, Beijing, and Shanghai, and took part in clandestine religious activities. On July 30, 1964, the Tianjin Municipal Bureau of Public Security accused him of "spreading harmful ideas" and held him at a detention center, where he was tortured because of his refusal to cooperate with the interrogators (Wu 2002: 150). His non-cooperation only aggravated the public security officials, and he was forced to undergo prolonged sleep deprivation and repetitive interrogations (Wu 2002: 151).

In 1967 Wu was pronounced a counterrevolutionary, an unforgivable crime at that time. He was immediately transferred to a labor camp in the Pingluo district of West China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. As Epaphras recalled, living conditions were depressingly bleak and harsh. Apart from the expected humiliations of terrible environment and malnutrition, he had to face many sessions of pervasive and intense indoctrination. Yet, Epaphras wrote that he had remained defiant while in captivity, refusing to study Mao's Little Red Book, sing revolutionary songs, or bow to Mao's portrait (Wu 2002: 152). His stark resistance to thought reform was met with more beatings. The physical and psychological tortures were severe, but what troubled him the most was the gradual collapse of the support provided by his family that had so far sustained him. Out of concern for survival, his wife in Tianjin denounced him and filed for divorce. One of his older brothers, an active Christian, was persecuted, and his elderly mother was harassed by the Red Guards. In 1981, Wu was transferred from the labor camp to a prison in Yinchuan. The prison conditions were better than those of the camp, and he was assigned to teach young inmates basic science and mathematics (Wu 2002: 152).

Epaphras was released from prison in 1987 at the age of sixty-one. Without the support of immediate relatives he was unable to reclaim his former urban household registration in Tianjin, and thus he lived in a hut next to the prison in Yinchuan and produced numerous theological writings. Unlike Watchman Nee, who died in the labor camp and had no control over his legacy, Epaphras directly constructed his spiritual persona in line with the widespread notion of an uncompromising church leader. He strove to make sense of his imprisonment and positioned himself next to other well-known Three-Self critics like Wang Mingdao and Watchman Nee. He drew on many of Nee's teachings to conceptualize the church as an autonomous body that should not subordinate itself to state control. Encouraging other unregistered churches in Yinchuan to turn their ministry into a Four-Self model (i.e., self-supporting, self-evangelizing, self-administrating, and self-theologizing), he defended the spiritual independence of the church and advocated a total separation of the church from the state, ignoring the call of pro-government bishop K.H. Ting (Ding Guangxun 丁光训) to accommodate Christianity with socialism. By appropriating his prison story for new use, he reinvented himself as a champion of religious resistance and would continue to reject the Three-Self Patriotic Movement until his death in 2002 (Chen 2006).

The Story of Robert Huang

In 1951, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church became one of the first Protestant denominations to be co-opted by the government. Some pro-government Adventists played a dual role in church-state interactions, joining the Three-Self Patriotic Movement partly out of self-interest and partly in the hope of meliorating the harshness of anti-religious policies and indigenizing the church. They mediated between the Communist officials and their congregants in order to bring the church closer to the state's revolutionary agenda (Lee 2012: 599–600). Most of the Adventists, however, remained skeptical of the political agenda of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. They found themselves in a dilemma, torn between the public need to support the state and their private commitment to upholding their faith and continuing their religious activities at home. When they were not permitted to hold regular religious activities outside the Three-Self affiliated churches, they took up activism and created a self-sustaining Christian community.

Those church leaders with strong convictions backed their words with acts of resistance and circumvention, and they strengthened the faith of their flock against Communist influence. For example, David Lin, a senior church leader,

translated most of the spiritual writings of Ellen G. White from English into Chinese and circulated the texts among his followers (Chow 2017). The graphic accounts of spiritual battles in White's works provided readers with an eschatological lens through which to interpret their experience: justification through confession of faith, sanctification by enduring persecution, and the promise that a remnant would be saved (Peng 1951). This translation project was of great significance because it standardized Adventist doctrine and instilled a sense of spiritual identity among congregants (Whitehouse 2000: 176–180). As a result, readers internalized doctrine themselves, self-theologized their everyday experience, and became agents of religious change in their social circles (Lee and Chow 2013).

One unintended consequence of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was the growth of activism among Adventist youth. A good example is Robert Huang, who organized prayer groups and revival meetings in Shanghai during the 1950s (Maxwell and Huang 2004). His youngest brother, Norman Huang 黃兆劲, was jailed during the Cultural Revolution (Huang n.d. a: 26–27). What motivated their evangelistic zeal was the belief in the providential care of God and the hope of final deliverance from suffering.

Robert Huang, son of an American-born Cantonese merchant in Shanghai, entered the Adventist ministry and took up pastoral duties after the arrest of many senior church leaders. He conducted private services at church members' homes, ministered to sick congregants in hospitals, and organized prayer groups throughout the 1950s. When the state launched the Socialist Education Movement (1962–1965) to crack down on political and social dissent, municipal authorities exploited the campaign to attack local Catholics and Protestants.

In 1964, Robert was arrested and jailed in Shanghai's Number One Detention Center. In his cell he met many educated inmates, including a Nationalist air force commander, a history professor, and several former Nationalist municipal and district officials. These prisoners were middle-aged and were treated relatively well. They were given books and permitted to mail letters. Robert explained to the guards that Adventist dietary law prohibited the consumption of unclean meats, especially pork. Because there were several Uyghur Muslim prisoners, his request for halal food was approved (Huang n.d. b: 13, 32). This reference to the consumption of halal food is significant because it indicates that as Robert negotiated between his religious convictions and the harsh prison realities, he upheld Adventist dietary practice as a way to affirm the faith.

As prison conditions worsened during the 1960s, Robert sustained his sanity and optimism by conversing with cellmates. When he met other Christian cellmates, he put his pastoral skills to use and formed an informal group for mutual

support. A man in this group named Adam was a civil engineer and active lay leader in Shanghai. After 1949, Adam had taken up pastoral duties and looked after his congregants. During the Cultural Revolution, a fellow church member betrayed him and reported his clandestine religious activities to the government, thus leading to his imprisonment. Robert sympathized with Adam's experience and catered to his emotional and spiritual needs, reciting biblical texts and humming spiritual songs loud enough for Adam to hear. He once wrote down some biblical verses on a piece of tissue paper for Adam to meditate on and instructed him to hide the paper in Mao's Little Red Book, the only reading material permitted in prison. Whenever the prison guards saw Adam reading, they joked about him becoming a new Maoist convert (Huang n.d. b: 30–31, 47; Maxwell and Huang 2004: 86–89).

Another Christian prisoner was Old Chan, who graduated from one of the Christian colleges in Shanghai and was an active member of the YMCA. He was targeted by the state as a rightist in the Anti-Rightist Campaign and received a long prison sentence (Maxwell and Huang 2004: 99). The third Christian cellmate was Lai Chi, a Cantonese from Hong Kong, who was arrested in Shanghai on suspicion of spying for Taiwan. Coming from an Adventist background in Hong Kong, Lai Chi never took his faith seriously. After his arrest he shared a cell with a Catholic priest, and the encounter aroused his interest in Christianity. Once, while the cellmates were showering in the prison bathroom, the priest seized the opportunity to rebaptize Lai Chi by sprinkling water over his head. When Lai Chi was reassigned to the same cell as Robert Huang, his life came full circle. After growing up as an Adventist, Lai Chi accepted Catholicism in prison but returned to the Adventist teachings through Robert (Maxwell and Huang 2004: 98).

The interactions among these Christian prisoners proved beneficial to one another, creating a mutual bond and renewing their spiritual strength. In the summer of 1967, the prison guards distributed copies of the *Liberation Daily*, and the front-page story was the Arab-Israeli War of June 5–10, 1967, or the Six-Day War. When the Christian prisoners saw the report, they expressed an interest in biblical prophecies about the end of the world and the Last Judgment, notably those in the book of Revelation (Pagels 2012).

Robert allegedly invoked prophetic images to interpret the religious persecution of his own time, just as John of Patmos had critiqued the anti-Christian policies of the Roman Empire two thousand years prior. Robert explained that the modern state of Israel had benefited from divine protection just as Moses did when he performed the miracle of parting the Red Sea, enabling the ancient Israelites to escape the Egyptian troops. He stated that the Six-Day War was a temporal marker in the Christian eschatological calendar, symbolizing

the beginning of all the terrible events at the end of human history (Maxwell and Huang 2004: 111–112). The prisoners learned to view the world and their own situation through an eschatological lens and expressed a desire for the Christian God to save them from persecution. This apocalyptic vision not only undermined the Maoist idea of progress toward a socialist utopia driven by class struggle and technological advances, but also transposed their focus from the pains of penal incarceration to belief in Jesus's Second Coming.

Meanwhile, Robert exercised his pastoral skills inside the prison walls. He reminisced that he reached out to victims of Mao's mass campaigns, mainly the landlords, intellectuals, and officials of the Nationalist regime, because he could easily appeal to them with a promise of salvation and an explanation for their suffering. The experiences of the following three men illustrate the success of Huang's evangelization. Yu Kwok, an elementary school principal, was labeled a counterrevolutionary rightist (Maxwell and Huang 2004: 124). Old Leung was an experienced journalist who had supported the Nationalists and Communists during the Anti-Japanese War. He was, however, suspected by the Communists to be a Nationalist spy and received a long prison sentence in the 1950s. As he was betrayed by the men in power, he lost his trust in the government (Maxwell and Huang 2004: 113–117). Old Chong, an elderly peasant, was accused of insulting Mao during the Cultural Revolution. When it started raining during a parade, Old Chong unconsciously used Mao's portrait to cover his head. Someone reported the act to the officials, and Old Chong was given a three-year sentence (Maxwell and Huang 2004: 124). Feeling disillusioned with life, these prisoners listened to the many biblical stories told by Huang and found in Christianity a solace for their sorrows. Their conversion coincided with their desire for emotional support in the midst of political and social upheaval.

In a society that respects kinship, Robert benefitted from the assistance of loved ones. When his relatives were permitted to visit him in the early 1970s, they hid a pocket-sized English Bible in a bar of soap and smuggled it past the prison guards. He was delighted to have the Bible and carefully hid it in Mao's writings when reading it. He once concealed the notes for his life story in a medicine bottle and tried to slip the bottle into his sister's hand, but he was caught and punished by the prison guards. He was forced to stand in contorted positions for days while being physically beaten and kicked by other inmates. Then the guards stopped serving him halal food and gave him pork. At first he protested by fasting, but when he began coughing and sneezing like a tuberculosis patient, he acted against his conscience and ate pork to keep himself alive. When he later learned about the arrest of his youngest brother, Norman Huang, for criticizing Mao, Lin Biao, and the Gang of Four, his brother's courage

inspired him to uphold Adventist dietary practice again (Huang n.d. a: 26–27). Robert appealed to the guards and demanded halal food. The guards eventually approved his request.

The stories of defiance sustained many Christian prisoners psychologically. One morning, Robert heard over the loudspeaker that some female prisoners continued to pray to the Christian God even though the authorities criticized them as reactionaries. At a mass trial against a Catholic priest, the prison guards ordered the inmates to participate. Far from giving into political pressure, the priest vowed "to uphold the faith till his death" (Huang n.d. b: 67–70). By recalling these stories, Robert portrayed himself as being as courageous as these like-minded Christian prisoners who rejected any demand for political loyalty (Huang n.d. b: 83).

Because Robert was reluctant to give up his faith, the prison authorities occasionally put him in solitary confinement and deprived him of sleep. When he saw some Christian crosses scribbled on the walls of his cell, he imagined conversations that he might have with other people about his faith (Maxwell and Huang 2004: 84–90). He later shared these meditative techniques with fellow Christian prisoners and urged them to adhere to their belief. On another occasion, the authorities staged a trial against Robert. They tortured him by cuffing his hands behind his back, forcing him to kneel for hours, and chaining him to the wall. In April 1970 they ordered Robert to read aloud the names of those Christian prisoners who were to be executed, one notable victim being Shanghai's Little Flock leader Zhang Yuzhi 张愚之, who had welcomed Epaphras Wu to the Assembly in 1950 (Keating 2012: 102; Wu 2004: 57–65; Huang n.d. b: 77). This episode left a deep psychological wound in his life.

After the Cultural Revolution, Robert and his brother Norman were released from prison. Their cases were rehabilitated by the state, and Robert was issued a ministerial license to serve in Shanghai's Three-Self patriotic churches. Instead of working for the patriotic religious institutions, however, Robert and Norman re-established contact with their eldest brother, John, who had left for the United States in 1950 and was now a successful surgeon in California. Through John's arrangement, the Huang brothers left China for the United States in the early 1980s, with Robert attending the Adventist seminary and Norman studying medicine (Wong 2002). During his theological training, Robert drafted his testimony to come to grips with his imprisonment. Unlike Epaphras Wu, who blamed the state for his ordeal, Robert narrated his prison life from a linear religious perspective. The mastery of biblical vocabulary and the emotional sentiments that he displayed in the testimony strengthened his depiction of the faith practices to be expected from a faithful Adventist in a hostile environment.

Conclusion

While many Chinese Christian hagiographies herald Watchman Nee, Epaphras Wu, and Robert Huang as courageous individuals standing up to the Maoist state, this study contextualizes their testimonies as both a spiritual mythmaking process and a moral act of resistance. Driven by the fever of nationalism and the need for mass mobilization, both the Republican and Maoist regimes deliberately mythicized historical figures in order to submit the autonomous self to the collective national body (Cohen 2009). By subscribing to the same narrative model of linear progression, some Christian leaders participated in their own mythmaking. When they constructed the memory of their prison ordeal, they transformed it from a period of bitter suffering and hardship into a unique experience of survival and tried to extract theological insights for faith consolidation. The three cases demonstrate that these religious prisoners' adherence to biblical authority in personal, political, and ecclesial matters set them at odds with the state. Rejecting socialist values and norms, they embraced Christian teachings, the support of family and peer networks, and devotional practices such as prayer, fasting, and Sabbath observance. Christian doctrine, faith practices, and peer support provided the prisoners with strong spiritual capital to sustain themselves while incarcerated. By emphasizing the centrality of the Bible in shaping their identity, they were keen to theologize their prison experiences. They went through a gradual process of coming to terms with the meaning of being a faithful Christian in times of persecution. This reflected their spiritual transformation through the support they received from their families and congregations toward a more personal relationship with the Christian God, and kept them from abandoning their faith.

In reality, the autonomy of the three prisoners was heavily restricted within the state-controlled prison domain. The Communist prison authorities were charged with the task of remolding and transforming Christian prisoners into new socialist citizens. They relied on interrogation techniques to reshape these prisoners' religious commitment into a new devotion to the socialist state. In this dangerous situation, there was almost nothing the religious prisoners could do to overthrow the authoritarian regime. Nonetheless, these hagiographies suggest that Christian piety instilled a spirit of dissent and a glimpse of hope among them, giving them a theological framework to defend their faith in the most hostile environment and to carve out a limited mental space for spiritual empowerment. Their struggles inside the prisons, both real and imagined, reveal the characteristics of a historically grounded spirituality that emerged in China as a theology of defiance or a gospel of suffering. This

theology of defiance critiqued the politicization of the religious sphere and its total identification with Maoism.

These prisoners came from devoted Christian families and refused to embrace a socialist regime that demanded full religious and political devotion. Watchman Nee was a popular preacher in the 1920s, and seminary education provided Epaphras Wu and Robert Huang with sufficient biblical knowledge and pastoral skills to engage in clandestine religious activities. When they confronted the hostile state, they were capable of using biblical ideas and metaphors to defend the faith. Their defiance also owed much to the teachings of different Protestant denominations. The Little Flock's focus on repentance, piety, and discipleship intensified the belief of Watchman Nee and Epaphras Wu. Seventh-Day Adventism's eschatology and its emphasis on a simple diet and Sabbath observance sustained Robert Huang in prison. The Little Flock seemed to have made some progress in conceptualizing the complicated relationship between the sacred and the profane. Both Watchman Nee and Epaphras Wu set the Christian God apart from the secular authority, and even subjected the latter to the spiritual judgment of God. This insight strengthened these two individuals' resolve to resist the Maoist state.

In the final analysis, one element to be underscored is the way in which these hagiographies served as a shared cultural resource that transcended Chinese Christians' denominational and theological differences (Cohen 2009: xix; Mariani 2011). At the very least, some Little Flock members and Seventh-Day Adventists could easily refer to these heroic stories when responding to the demands of various church audiences and the challenges of future political leadership. The significance of these stories among Chinese Christians lies more in the practical lessons that can be drawn from them than in their accurate embodiment of empirical truth (Cohen 2009: xviii). A major lesson is that the contentious relationship between church and state in Maoist China never resulted in a clear victory for the state. Even when the Communist authorities persecuted the Little Flock and Seventh-Day Adventists and cast them as opponents of the state, imprisoned Christians were able to turn their apparent defeat into a source of strength and endurance. The three Christian figures studied here deployed their spiritual capital to strengthen their religious convictions and used their pastoral and mobilizing skills to proselytize among inmates and build networks inside the prison cells. These stories challenge us to explore new modes of reimagining hopeless circumstances without losing sight of the prisoners' tragic lives, and to broaden our view of the limited options available to them within Maoist China. Even though these prisoners had no intention to subvert the one-party system, their efforts embodied elements of religious defiance and thus provided the ideal ingredients for the spiritual mythmaking process in subsequent decades.

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