

**Dying for Faith, Transforming Memories:
Chinese Christian Martyr Watchman Nee (1903—1972)**

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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) in late 20th-century China to study the making of martyrdom in Chinese Protestant Christianity. When countries in East Asia developed into centralized nation-states, the secular governments often perceived Christianity as subversive and mobilized official resources to marginalize, persecute, and destroy indigenous Christian communities. Watchman Nee, who founded the Christian Assembly (*jidutu juhuichu* 基督徒聚会处), or Little Flock (*xiaoqun* 小群), a popular indigenous Protestant movement in the early 20th-century, and who was arrested in 1952 and died in a labor camp in 1972. His biography 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 to the state outside and inside the prison walls has impacted the Chinese church-state relations today, and Protestants worldwide often refer to martyrs like Watchman Nee to develop new paradigms for negotiation with anti-Christian forces.

Furthermore, the martyrdom of Watchman Nee highlights the complexity of memory production in China. The Reform period saw a flood of memoirs recalling persecution and hardship suffered during the Cultural Revolution. These memoirs, widely known as the wounded literature (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学), provided an outlet for healing psychological scars associated with political turmoil. With a similar emphasis on recent trauma, the stories of Chinese Christian martyrs reveal both the lived experience of individual believers and their ongoing struggles with a state that reduced all responsibility to a small clique called the Gang of Four. As with other marginalized groups, Chinese Christians reclaim their alternative histories long submerged under the dominant official historiography of Western imperialism. They delved into their traumatic past to seek new meanings about self and nation, and about the role of a patriotic Christian in a socialist state. While many countries launch truth and reconciliation commissions to address the aftermaths of regime transition, these Christian memoirs offer a

unique Chinese perspective on the differences between pluralistic and repressive approaches toward truth-telling.

With respect to the primary sources, the dossier of Watchman Nee has not yet been released by the different bureaus of public security. This study relies on the testimonial accounts given by his cellmate. Such eyewitness's accounts must be used with great caution. The accounts appear to be hagiographical at first sight, portraying Nee as a moral exemplar who refused to compromise with the officials and sacrificed himself for the faith. The hagiographical testimonies portray martyrs such as Nee as autonomous individuals with superior spirituality and highlight the dynamics of human interactions, the formation of collective religious identity, and the change of theological orientation in times of crisis. This image of a victorious enthronement and vindication over the Caesar 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 Chinese Christianity in a crisis moment. Nonetheless, these persecution accounts should not be seen as a mere reflection of past individual experience; they are written to assert the agency of Christian martyr in a politicized society. Because Christianity instilled some elements of dissent among the martyrs, their beliefs and experiences were bound together in a set of spiritual, family, and peer relationships under specific temporal and spatial settings.