

BOOK REVIEW

Lian Xi. *Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, A Martyr in Mao's China*. New York: Basic Books, 2018.

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On November 9 of 2018, the ChinaAid Association, a Christian NGO focusing on China's human rights issues, announced the Lin Zhao Freedom Award in honor of the martyred Christian Lin Zhao.¹ Lin Zhao's name has become a myth and carries different meanings to various groups of people in China. The first time I heard Lin Zhao's name, almost ten years ago, I was still a college freshman in China, but I was also a student leader of underground Christians on campus. One of my Christian friends told me that Lin Zhao was a Christian martyr who died for her faith; she had refused to surrender her faith to the communist regime. By that time, Lin Zhao's name was already well-known in the Christian circles as "China's Saint" who died as a consequence of religious persecution. Independent documentary filmmaker Hu Jie's *Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul* (2004) brought more attention to Lin Zhao and reframed the discussion not only around her life as a Christian but also her actions as a political dissident in Mao's China. As the Chinese government continuously tightens its control and censorship over public media in recent years, ironically, Lin Zhao's name has reached an unprecedentedly broad circle of audiences. Weeks before the Fifty-Year Anniversary of Lin Zhao's death on August 29 of 2018, my friends on WeChat and Facebook began sharing articles and photos of Lin Zhao. To non-Christians in China, Lin Zhao is now the symbol of freedom, democracy, and resistance to totalitarian rules. While the political environment in China today once more reminds reformers and activists of the great turmoil during Mao's time, Lin Zhao's name has become a lighthouse for those who want to bring their country back towards a path of political freedom and democratization.

It is within this complex historical context that Lian Xi published his *Blood Letters*, a new biography of Lin Zhao. Lian's contribution lies not only in discussing Lin Zhao with Chinese readers but also in introducing her to people outside of China. Like other Christian reformers and political dissidents such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sophie Scholl, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Jerzy Popieluszko, Lian believes that Lin Zhao is like "that lamplight [which] bore witness to human dignity and the tenacity of the human will to be free (8)."

Blood Letters is the very first English biography of Lin Zhao. Using almost all possible sources the author could find, it is also the most thorough investigation of Lin Zhao's life in any language. Like the many millions of people who were persecuted to death during the Mao Era and left without any voice, Lin Zhao's story could have easily vanished from historical memory. Luckily for Lin Zhao and for scholars interested in her, Lin Zhao produced a large number of writings during her years in the prison. When pens and writing tools were unavailable, Lin Zhao used her own blood to continue her

writing. Thirteen years after Lin Zhao's death in 1981, she was rehabilitated. The judge in charge of Lin Zhao's case copied her prison writings and returned them to her family, although the primary legal files of Lin Zhao's case remain locked to this day. In 2013, together with Lin Zhao's earlier writings and the returned prison writings, *The Collected Writings of Lin Zhao* was privately printed and Lian procured a copy. Since 2012, Lian supplemented Lin Zhao's writings with extensive archival research both in China and in the U.S., including the Hoover Institution's special collection "Lin Zhao Papers."² Lian has also conducted interviews and correspondence with those who were close to Lin Zhao when she was still alive.

To scholars and readers outside the China field, Lian provides the readers with detailed background information about major political movements during Mao's China, including the Land Reform, the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Great Famine, and the Cultural Revolution. Many people came to know Lin Zhao through Hu Jie's 2004 documentary film *Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul* on Lin Zhao's life and Hu Jie's 2013 documentary film *Spark* on the Anti-Rightist Movement (including Lin Zhao). Together with many independent documentary filmmakers like Hu Jie and China historians who work on social activism and intellectuals such as Timothy Cheek and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Lian's book deepens our understanding of political activism and intellectuals' life in Mao's China.³ In contrast to Hu's emphasis on Lin Zhao's identity as a political dissident, however, Lian also examines Lin Zhao through the lens of an individual Christian.⁴ As Professor of World Christianity at Duke Divinity School, Lian continues his endeavor on the indigenization of Christianity in China. Lin Zhao's life is a focal point where the communist movement and Christian faith interact and clash with one another.

Chapters I through 4 tell the story of Lin Zhao's life before she was arrested and sent to prison. Lin Zhao's original name was Peng Lingzhao. She was born in 1932 into a well-educated family in the prosperous city of Suzhou. Lin Zhao's father worked for the Nationalist government before 1949, while her mother was a progressive socialist. In 1947, Lin Zhao entered a Southern Methodist mission school -- Laura Haygood Memorial School for Girls. Lin Zhao was baptized as a Christian during her years at Laura Haygood, but she was also exposed to communism and became a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1948. On the eve of the CCP's "liberation" in 1949, however, Lin Zhao lost her party membership because she disobeyed the Party's command to leave Suzhou for safety concerns. Lian emphasizes that Lin Zhao's loss of her Party membership was "a shameful blemish" in her fervent communist belief (30). Against her parents' will,

Lin Zhao then joined the South Jiangsu Journalism Vocational School. As a journalist, Lin Zhao traveled to rural China and participated in political campaigns, including suppression campaigns targeted at Christians. During the same period, Lin Zhao also had a number of unpleasant experiences with local Party cadres.

In 1954, Lin Zhao was admitted to the Chinese Department at Peking University, the most prestigious university in China. At Peking University, Lin Zhao was an active poet and editor for the university's official periodical. She remained a faithful communist believer and sought every opportunity to restore her Party membership, but the Anti-Rightist Movement eventually turned her world upside-down. Because she showed sympathy for her friends who were labeled as "rightists," Lin Zhao was finally added to the list of rightists in early 1958. Lin Zhao's romance with communism was over. In the same year, she openly resumed her Christian faith. In 1960, Lin Zhao was involved in the publication of an underground periodical, *A Spark of Fire*, with a few rightist students. In one of Lin Zhao's poems, *A Day in Prometheus' Passion*, she mocked Mao as Zeus, a relentless dictator. The student group, including Lin Zhao, was then arrested as a "counterrevolutionary organization" by the CCP.

Chapters 5 through 8 focus on Lin Zhao's prison life and writings until her death in 1968. Lin Zhao was first sent to the No. 2 Detention House of Shanghai after her arrest in 1960, where she learnt about the Great Famine and the subsequent retirement of Mao from the political front line. Lin Zhao's resistant attitude towards the CCP began to soften, but she later realized it was nothing but an illusion. Lin Zhao was shortly released from the prison for medical reasons. A few weeks later, however, Lin Zhao voluntarily returned to prison because her friends remained in jail. Since 1962, even police authorities began to question Lin Zhao's mental stability. Lin Zhao was transferred to the Shanghai Municipal Prison (also known as Tilanqiao) in 1962 and then the Shanghai No. 1 Detention House, the "demon's den" in 1963. Lin Zhao started to protest in the prison and then finished her first writing in blood in 1964. Lian also shows how, during the same period, Lin Zhao suffered constantly from both physical and mental torture. She was then transferred back to Tilanqiao.

Lin Zhao spent the rest of her life in prison. The most remarkable legacy that Lin Zhao had left to us during this period, as Lian emphasizes throughout his book, is her prison writings. As a poet, Lin Zhao drafted a number of poems in prison. Believing herself innocent, she also wrote a letter of appeal to Shanghai's mayor Ke Qingshi. Ke Qingshi's sudden death after the letter, however, filled Lin Zhao with sadness and guilt—she believed that it was her letter that led to Ke's death. Lin Zhao also wrote to the United Nations, John F. Kennedy, and the *People's Daily*, the CCP's official newspaper. In her letters to the *People's Daily*, she criticized Mao and the CCP, claiming that China had become a police state and Mao's rule was nothing but "a reign of terror." But the letter was never forwarded outside the prison. While the Cultural Revolution was under way in 1966 and 1967 outside the prison, the chaos did not change Lin Zhao's conditions in any notable way. In late 1966, authorities recommended the death penalty for Lin Zhao. This was officially approved in April of 1968. We know

nothing about the last three months in Lin Zhao's life because her writings include nothing about that period. On April 29 of 1968, Lin Zhao was executed in Tilanqiao. Officials delivered the news to her mother and demanded a bullet fee, "since Lin Zhao had wasted a people's bullet (237)."

Blood Letters is a biography and a portrait of Lin Zhao. Similar to the famous 16th century French writer Michel Montaigne, who wrote in his Essays that

"If my design had been to seek the favor of the world, I would have decked myself out better and presented myself in a studied gait. Here I want to be seen in my simple, natural, everyday fashion, without striving or artifice; for it is my own self that I am painting I can assure you that I would most willingly have portrayed myself whole, and wholly naked,"⁵

Lian's book is neither an academic inquiry of political struggle in Mao's China nor a hagiography of a female religious or political martyr. Lian instead presents Lin Zhao in her most "simple, natural, everyday fashion," even "wholly naked." Lin Zhao's defects and weaknesses are as notable as her virtues and strengths. Lin Zhao's life, from the point of her Laura Haygood years to her death, was an unending struggle between opposing ideals and with dilemmas that she was never able to resolve. Lin Zhao's war, as Lian presents it, was both a war against a secular regime, but also a war against her own mind.

Lin Zhao was a romantic poet. Her poetic character urged her to pursue fervently whatever she believed to be true, including both Christian faith and communist faith, without considering the consequences. Lin Zhao was a true Communist. It is worth asking if Lin Zhao had ever abandoned her communist faith even during her years in the prison. Her communist faith was poetic and idealistic. She could not bear any of the Party's defects. At the same time, when she was a journalist in rural China, she did not hesitate at suppressing and abusing the Christians or landlord class to fulfill the needs of the Party. Lin Zhao was also a Christian. Although she abandoned her faith for a while during her most fervent communist years, she eventually realized that it was only God who listened to all her sorrows and confessions. Lin Zhao's life showed great resemblance to the prodigal son who finally returned to his father and to David, the poet-king who asked for God's guidance and forgiveness ceaselessly.

Although Lian's book is not an academic inquiry into Lin Zhao's life, it raises compelling questions for which even Lian has no direct answers. How do we understand Lin Zhao's controversial identities as both a communist and a Christian? Can Lin Zhao be a communist and a Christian at the same time? Are these two identities mutually exclusive? Although many Christians in China portray Lin Zhao as a Christian martyr, Lian shows that her Christian identity was far from spotless. As Lian points out, during her most miserable years in prison, "what sustained it was her intense religious faith (2)." But Lin Zhao's Christian faith was highly personal and imaginary. In Hu Jie's *Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul*, Hu does not emphasize Lin Zhao's identity as a Christian. To what degree is Lin Zhao's current identification as a religious symbol the fantasy of Christians in China or is it rooted in the fact that she acted like an exemplary Christian in prison? Similarly, Lin Zhao's disgust

against Mao's regime during her prison years was not necessarily a sign of her anti-communist belief. It is plausible that Lin Zhao remained a true communist her entire life time. Was she simply disappointed about the distorted communist regime in Mao's China? Moreover, we should not forget Lin Zhao's identity as a woman. The gender element has been downplayed in most discussions on Lin Zhao so far, including in Lian's book.

Like many social activists today who portray Lin Zhao as the forerunner of social activism in the PRC, Lian also tries to locate Lin Zhao within the genealogy of political dissidents in China. Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, praised Lin Zhao, saying, "so beautiful is the flight of a free soul (245)." According to Lian, another well-known dissident commented that "we now have our genealogy" because of Lin Zhao (246). Lin Zhao has undoubtedly become the symbol of democratization and social activism in China today. What is the meaning of Lin Zhao's life to regular people, and those from different religious or political backgrounds? Lian does not delve deeply into this aspect, but rather leaves the question of interpretation open-ended. Chinese social activists' efforts to democratize China during the 1980s and the 2000s also bore few traces of influence from Lin Zhao. During the current regime when social activism meets unprecedentedly intense oppression, how does Lin Zhao's life offer us more inspiration and new perspectives? Moreover, social activism is not the only area where Lin Zhao left an impact. As I mentioned in the beginning, Lin Zhao's name conveyed different connotations to the Christian circles in China. How do we understand the emerging "Lin Zhao fervor" in China? While Lian does not explicitly address these questions, his valuable book opens up the gate for more serious discussion on Lin Zhao and her legacies.

All told, Lin Zhao was also mentally unstable. Throughout Lin Zhao's life, the boundary between reality and fantasy was so blurred that, at times, the readers doubt whether Lin Zhao's

tragic fate was a consequence of political persecution or of her inner spiritual warfare. After Ke Qingshi's death, Lin Zhao firmly believed that Ke was persecuted to death because of her case. Lin Zhao later imagined herself to be Ke's wife in another world. In 1965 and 1966, Lin Zhao was working on a long autobiographical piece named "Chatters of a Spirit Couple" where Lin Zhao turned her prison cell into a magical place where she chatted with Ke's spirit and her deceased father. Lin Zhao's mental status, however, should not undermine her role as a true and fragile human being. When Lin Zhao wrote to her mother before the Chinese New Year of 1968 about the food she wanted, I just could not help tearing up at the sheer humanity of her desires:

"I want to eat, Mama! Stew for me a pot of beef, and also slow-cook a pot of lamb. Prepare for me a salted pig head ... Roast a chicken or a duck. Go get a loan if you don't have the money ... Hey! Now after I wrote all this, I took another look at it and I laughed! How often does one get to have a hearty laugh in this world of dust? ... I am sending you a daughter's love and longing, my Mama (230)!"

In contrast to many people who have turned Lin Zhao's name into a dead myth and symbol, Lian's *Blood Letters* shows the true Lin Zhao in her most natural, everyday fashion. Lian accurately captures the true meaning of human dignity, not as mythical heroic characters without weaknesses, but a sincere freedom fighter who was also fragile and helpless. Fifty years after Lin Zhao's death, what has changed in the country where she lived? Lin Zhao's tomb has already become a pilgrimage site, but it is a pilgrimage site under surveillance cameras. Just a few days before the first draft of this book review was written, student activists from the same Peking University she attended were once again secretly arrested. The old story of control, surveillance, freedom, and hope has not ended. Lin Zhao's spirit never dies.

¹ http://www.chinaaid.org/2018/11/chinaaid-announces-lin-zhao-freedom.html?fbclid=IwAR3h1CG2HNGOgaWJk41xn2HQaBaxRx_PCQIX6GNVRUN-y3gau886TKUuJQY

² <http://pdf.oac.cdlib.org/pdf/hoover/2009C41.pdf>

³ See Cheek, Timothy. *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Wasserstrom, Jeffrey. *Student Protests in Twentieth-Century*

China: The View from Shanghai (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

⁴ See Lian, Xi. *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)

⁵ Michel de Montaigne, trans. M. A. Screech. *The Essays: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 3