

The remarkable life and martyrdom of Lin Zhao

As Chinese communism turned to violence, Zhao turned to Christ. Lian Xi tells her story in memorable fashion.

by [Scott W. Sunquist](#) in the [June 20, 2018](#) issue

In Review

image of Lian Xi's biography of Christian Chinese martyr Lin Zhao

Blood Letters

The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China

By Lian Xi
Basic Books

Almost exactly 50 years ago, with no fanfare, a 20-year prison sentence was altered to a death penalty, and the poet-dissident Lin Zhao immediately became a Christian martyr. Her story, as told by Lian Xi, is both remarkable and common. *Blood Letters*, carefully researched and timely, reveals the trajectory of a privileged girl who went from Christian to communist comrade to a Christian resister whose crime was being an “impenitent counterrevolutionary.” Even told poorly, this would be a remarkable story. Xi tells it in memorable fashion.

Behind the tale is an intriguing backstory. As Xi tells it, “In 2013, *The Collected Writings of Lin Zhao* . . . was privately printed. I was given a copy. It was a godsend.” Miraculously, in 1981, 13 years after her death, Lin Zhao's case was reviewed by a judge, and she was posthumously declared innocent. The judge decided to release the secondary documents—those not dealing directly with the trial—which, it turns out, are a treasure trove of poetry, personal and editorial letters, and other writings. Many were written in her own blood, as she would prick her finger and collect the blood in a spoon. Xi pieced together the story through these many writings, interviews with those who knew Zhao, and an independent film titled *Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul*, produced by Hu Jie (2004).

Zhao's life is a mirror of China in the Maoist years. Like many young Christians, she was caught up in Mao's vision of a new China, where land reform and proletarian rule would create something close to the community described in Acts 2. A passionate but sickly young woman, she got directly involved in land reform and sought to become a party member. She worked hard to please the Communist Party (and, by extension, to please “our dear Father” Mao).

Slowly she became disillusioned with the party and found her true fulfillment studying in the Chinese department at Peking University. She flourished there, becoming editor of the *Peking University Poetry Journal* and editor for the university's official journal. After the “rectification campaign” of the Hundred Flowers Movement and the sudden violence of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, Zhao turned inward as she “buried herself in

‘thread-bound books’ from antiquity.” Then she turned outward, protesting the injustice and violence. She’d found her voice.

Zhao’s theme from this point until her death was a cry for freedom. She wrote from prison to the editor of the *People’s Daily* and the United Nations. Toward the end of her life, she wrote to her mother daily. Always her theme was “Freedom, I cry out inside me, freedom!” Like a laser, she focused her vast and creative energy—an energy that waned as her tuberculosis flared up amid the cold conditions of prison—to help the world see the tyranny that was destroying her country. Her concern was not for herself but for the country she loved. The classic Chinese stories and poetry flowed through her veins and out onto the paper, seasoned with the Christian humility of personal sacrifice.

Some may see her only as a political martyr, but that would be inaccurate. Xi makes it clear that what gave Zhao the resilience and focus was her recommitment to her faith, her meditations on the love of her heavenly Father, and her Sunday private worship services. As communist ideology turned to violence, she returned to Christ.

Her writings should be included in the corpus of indigenous Chinese Christian writings, because they exemplify the extent to which Chinese theology has come out of personal suffering and complicated relations with the West. Zhao was introduced to Christianity through the Methodist school she attended. She had great appreciation for the American missionaries who baptized her, and she wanted to produce a book of spiritual reflections like the classic *Streams in the Desert*. She also deeply admired the United States and President Kennedy. His “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech, was a particular inspiration to her. It expressed her passion for the idea that if any people are oppressed, we are all oppressed.

Throughout the volume, Xi fills in details about the evolving—or, more accurately, devolving—political decisions of Chairman Mao that brought about starvation, imprisonment, denouncing campaigns, and executions. Xi shows how Zhao is relentless in crafting words with ink and blood as a silent cry for freedom against all tyranny. Thanks to the author’s careful and creative work, Zhao’s blood now cries out.

When I finished reading this book, I thought about the many millions of people who suffered under Mao’s rule and the many who desired to prove loyalty to “our father,” as well as those who, like Zhao, remained true to their convictions and were ground to death in the quest to create a more just society for the proletariat.

I finished the book just after arriving back from China. On the flight home I’d watched *Darkest Hour*, a film about Winston Churchill and the early days of World War II. Zhao had recognized the many parallels between Hitler and Mao. At one point in the film, Churchill argues with Neville Chamberlin about the necessity of resisting rather than negotiating with Hitler. Churchill muses, “In my experience, those nations who resisted a ruthless dictator—even if they lost—in the end, those nations came back. However, those who did not resist lost their identity and never returned.”

It seems that the same may be true for Christians. Those national churches that resisted the tyranny and oppression, even to the point of death, came back. Christianity has proven this in China today, and people like Zhao are the reason.