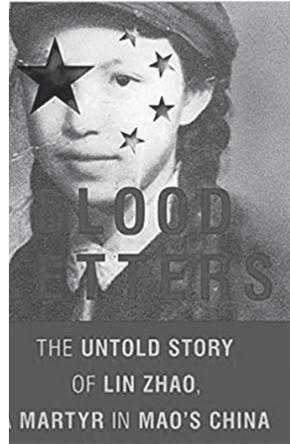


## Book Review

by Lida V. Nedilsky

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



To be solitary in one's thoughts, actions, beliefs, one need not be alone. But Lin Zhao (林昭), in *Blood Letters*, historian Lian Xi's (連曦) account of this young woman's life and death, comes to be both. Lin Zhao reaches her end solitary and alone by her parallel paths through Christianity and communism.

Neither among her writings nor in the recollections of her classmates or confidantes does Lin Zhao's conversion story find expression. As a student new to Laura Haygood Memorial School for Girls in Suzhou, the fifteen-year-old soon sinks “religious roots much deeper than she realized at the time,” Lian Xi explains in an interview for the United Methodist News Service. But within a year of receiving baptism, she undergoes a second conversion when in 1948, aged sixteen, she secretly joins the Chinese Communist Party. It is while working the land reform campaign of

1951 in nearby Taicang county, Jiangsu province, that Lin Zhao's version of community finds its rival in the Catholic Church. Mirroring her own demonstration of commitment, Bali township Catholics hold firmly to their devotions, to their local priest's leadership, and to congregational life. The best laid work plans cannot be implemented despite CCP operatives occupying the church building itself as their base. Even after land reform personnel fire warning shots heavenward to show they mean business, parishioners continue worshipping without skipping a beat.

Churches and campuses built by mainline Protestant missionaries and faithful in the wake of the Qing Dynasty's collapse lure Lin Zhao with the promise of peace once the anti-rightist campaign of 1957 plants in her mind the seeds of self-doubt. Whether on the spacious grounds of what was once Yenching University or inside the cavernous splendor of Dengshikou Congregational Church in Beijing, Lin Zhao finds she can integrate herself into a familiar scene set by her fellow Protestants. Does membership or communion with others come into play? Does her presence require commitment or participation? What are Lin Zhao's thoughts on faith having received Christian education, having submitted to conversion, having gained exposure to different expressions of Christian community? We know little. And what little we know is thanks to what companion Gan Cui observes: that the scene itself offers temporary sanctuary. The campus, once the product of a merger, is broken up

and scattered with the Chinese communist revolution. The church eventually crumbles with the fervor of the Cultural Revolution. Like the pagan temple branded with a cross, or cathedral icons replaced with Quranic verses, an existing identity is erased to make way for a new one. So it is with Lin Zhao herself.

Twice labeled a rightist – first in 1957 and then again in 1960 – Lin Zhao ends up an enemy of the people, incarcerated at No. 1 Detention House and Tilanqiao Prison, both in Shanghai. There she reaches for a rich store of syncretism she has collected like a private library to spawn solitary belief. Chinese classics, western mythology, Protestant hymns: all inspire Lin Zhao as she writes her own story. This she does precisely in a context of strictly controlled narrative. At the same time it lends strength to her lone resistance, this solitary belief is built on imaginings outside the boundaries of theology, the guidance of clergy, the general support of congregation, any holy book's passages, or even a select network of empathetic faithful. It takes shape in conflict with communist authorities, fellow inmates, and mute audiences Lin Zhao assails with her arsenal of unorthodoxy.

While undergoing pre-trial detention at Tilanqiao, Lian Xi tells us, Lin Zhao refuses the other-worldly Christianity promoted by an independent preacher for faith she infuses with worldly political passions. Rather than seek solace

among the living she soon resorts to fabricating sympathy among the dead: the recently assassinated President John F. Kennedy is a fellow follower of Christ, while Shanghai mayor, Ke Qingshi, becomes with his passing both ghost husband and sole convert whose spirit she baptizes. When inmate Christians are pressed to draw a clear line between themselves and God, Lin Zhao draws a clear line singling herself out: flanked by God the Father and Ke the Spirit, she calls out the Christians as Judas and compares herself to a lone soldier shooting apostates for committing the sacrilege of betraying God. Asking more of the Church than it is willing to give, Lin Zhao draws yet another line when she advocates on behalf of the tormented that a Mass be held to offer their restless souls peace.

*I am willing to be exiled to barren mountains and wilderness far, and to wander about – under the heavenly tent I'll stand.*

Does Lin Zhao foresee her eventual isolation when she composes her poem "Seagull" in 1958-9? Is it not this solitary action as a writer – or is it her solitary belief as a Christian – that determines her fate? Her determined resistance in Mao's China until her death in 1968 may explain why Lin Zhao cannot say, like Soviet hero Zoya Kosmodem'yanskaya to her tormentors, "I am not alone." But then can I say, can I insist now in the year 2020: No, you are not alone. Having the evidence from both your countless words and stunning silences, I see a choice. The choice, Lin

Zhao, is your own consistent decision to voice out without account or restraint. Is this how martyrs are made? Perhaps the subject of another scholarly book. But wherever your Christianity may have taken you, I recognize that lonely, twisted path. In me you have finally found your elusive audience.