CHAPTER 2

‘So Far from This Land as China’: the Primitivism of Watchman Nee

The previous chapter showed Brethren missionaries seeking to keep a tight control over primitivist narratives, resulting in the marginalising of Chinese Christian voices. However, the life of Watchman Nee, who is the focus of this chapter, demonstrates how primitivism could also be an empowering narrative for Chinese Christians.¹ Nee was one of the founders and the leader of an independent Chinese Christian movement, referred to most frequently in English as the Little Flock.² From its origins in Fuzhou in 1922, the movement expanded rapidly, so that by 1949 it numbered seventy thousand members in more than seven hundred meetings across China.³ It subsequently continued to expand, and has been one of the main engines driving the growth of Protestant Christianity in China at the end of the twentieth century.⁴

Robert Dann has argued that primitivist ideas have proven attractive to indigenous church leaders, and has highlighted Watchman Nee as a notable example of this.⁵ However, in historical accounts of the Little Flock, the significance of primitivist ideas has not been addressed.⁶ Primitivism, as this chapter will demonstrate, was in fact central to the rise of Nee’s movement, and this

---

¹ Nee was named Ni Shuzu at birth, but changed his name to Ni Tuosheng in 1925. ‘Tuosheng’ refers to the sound made by the clapper of a city watchman, and it is from this that his English name is derived. Nee changed his name to signify his new spiritual vocation.
² The name ‘Little Flock’ (Xiaoqun) derived from the title of a hymnbook used by the movement, but the name was disliked by Nee, who refused to give the movement any collective designation. His preferred name, the Christian Assembly (Jidutu juhuisuo), emphasised instead the local basis of the movement, and its intended normative character.
was because it provided a powerful solution to one of the most intractable problems historically faced by Christianity in China: its perceived foreignness. This was a problem that had preoccupied missionaries and Chinese Christians from the earliest days of their faith's entry into China, but it was a problem that intensified during the 1920s as a result of the rise of nationalism. The need to overcome the foreignness of Christianity was now an urgent one, and Nee's embrace of primitivism was an important strategy for achieving this. Nee promoted a faith that he claimed was drawn purely from the biblical texts, and free from any local cultural influences, whether Chinese or Western. This enabled him to tackle the perception of Christianity as an alien religion, while also maintaining its distinctive appeal. Simultaneously, by appealing to the Bible as their highest authority, the Little Flock were emboldened to seek an end to the missionary oversight of churches, and to promote independent and local leadership.

However, the Little Flock did not simply represent a protest against missionary authority. Though Nee was assertive of his independence and often critical of missionaries, he also drew heavily on evangelical models and writings from outside of China, and sought the recognition of groups and figures in Britain who he particularly admired. At the same time, Nee's success attracted attention from missionaries, as well as from evangelicals in Britain, provoking suspicion and admiration in equally extreme measures. While some criticised Nee for his antagonistic stance towards missionaries, others saw him as possessing a spiritual vitality that was lacking in Western churches. Nee's story therefore represents the success of missionary primitivism in China, but it was also the moment when primitivism itself, its meaning and practice, came under the most scrutiny. The chapter will focus on moments when this tension was most evident, including Nee's two visits to Britain, in 1933 and 1938–39. The chapter will also consider a number of figures who encountered Nee and the Little Flock, both in China and Britain. By examining their responses, seeing both what they admired and criticised about Nee, it will be possible to appreciate the nature of the exchanges that took place between Christians in China and the West, and the central role that primitivism played in these exchanges.

This chapter will therefore examine the influence that the Brethren movement had on Watchman Nee, analysing the ways that he utilised missionary primitivism to establish a new Christian movement in modern China. At the same time, the chapter will examine the effects that Nee's success had on the Brethren movement in Britain, and on evangelicals more widely. Indeed, the growth of the Little Flock was something that affected Christianity at a global level, and this has important implications for how we understand the emergence of Chinese Christianity during the twentieth century.