
The Church as an Alternative Polis: Revisiting the Ecclesiology of Wang Mingdao

ZHAO Wenjuan

Oxford Center for Religion and Public Life, Oxford, UK

Abstract

This article explores three different views of Wang Mingdao's ecclesial stance and his approach to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM): his refusal to join the TSPM as a political rather than theological approach to resisting the Chinese Communist Party; his refusal to accept the TSPM's authority as the Protestant church's resistance to Chinese hegemony; and his ecclesial stance as a sectarian withdrawal from the world. Considering these diverse scholarly perspectives, I interpret Wang's response to the TSPM as part of a necessary proclamatory action and propose that Wang's model of radical action models the politics of Jesus. His church is political only as defined by the gospel, and it represents a new *polis*—a kind of community established in and through Jesus of Nazareth to stand as a political alternative to the dominant politics of the world and contribute to an alternative identity of a *citizen*. I therefore approach Wang's faith practice from an ecclesiological standpoint and situate him and his ecclesial activities into the historical and theological context to explore his biblical-theological foundation for this new *polis* and its public witness. I argue that Wang's rejection of the TSPM and his alternative way of engaging with political issues such as imperialism, nationalism, and church-state relations show that his ecclesial stance is novel and distinct from other forms of politics.

Keywords

polis, ecclesiology, witness, Wang Mingdao, politics of Jesus Christ

Corresponding author

ZHAO Wenjuan: Wenjuan.Zhao@ocrpl.org

INTRODUCTION

Wang Mingdao is perhaps the most respected church leader in the history of the independent Chinese Protestant Church¹ and was even named “Dean of the House Churches.”² For most Chinese Protestant house churches, Wang’s way of practicing Christian belief—taking the Bible seriously within an ecclesial stance of operating independently from the governance of Western missionaries and the Chinese government based on his biblical-theological understanding—sets an ideal example. However, with the rapid development of the Protestant church in mainland China over recent decades, some urban Reformed house church leaders have, in pursuit of legitimacy and openness, attempted to redefine Wang’s stance. Specifically, they view his opposition to joining the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) as a political rather than theological way of resisting the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This altered perspective has set a tone for some Reformed house churches: they seek to leverage Wang’s existing international and domestic influence along with his historical legacy to push the Chinese government toward legitimizing the existence of the house church.

Wang Yi, for example, now portrays Wang as a sociopolitical figure with a sociopolitical mission who was jailed as a threat to the CCP. He also politicizes Wang’s resistance to joining the TSPM as a method of attacking both the TSPM and the state. Wang Yi suggests that the sixty years of religious persecution of the house church that have elapsed since Wang’s time is political and that the current house church should be a voice for ending the persecution.³ Wang Yi appropriates Wang for his own causes, proclaiming that his own attack on the state and the TSPM is the continuation of the work of the gospel of Wang.⁴ On the other hand, Western scholars such as

1 Wu Liming (吴利明), *Christianity and Social Changes in China* 《基督教与中国社会变迁》 (Hong Kong: Chinese Christian Literature Council Ltd., 1981) (香港: 基督教文艺出版社, 1981), 133.

2 Cited by Thomas Alan Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao’s Stand for the Persecuted Church of China* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 7.

3 Liu Tongsu (刘同苏) and Wang Yi (王怡), *Observations of China’s House Churches in Cities* 《观看中国城市家庭教会》 (Taiwan: Christian Arts Press, 2012) (台湾: 基文社, 2012), 11–16.

4 Wang Yi, “Reaffirming Our Stance on the House Churches: 95 Theses” (我们对家庭教会立场的重申), in *Wangyi’s Works: On the Church-State Relations* (王怡牧师文

Carsten Timothy Vala interpret Wang through a Western context and adopt a social-movement theory to explain Wang's refusal to accept the TSPM's authority and resist Chinese hegemony over the Protestant church.⁵ At the same time, Jing Jing criticizes Wang's ecclesial stance as presenting a kind of sectarian withdrawal from the world, resulting in the church losing its capacity to contribute to broader society.⁶

Despite the controversy surrounding the nature of Wang's position, those in China who hold theologically and biblically conservative beliefs and continue the legacy of the indigenous church movement of the early twentieth century disagree with the redefinition and criticism. For them, Wang's fight with the TSPM had nothing to do with politics because his rejection of TSPM affiliation was for the purpose of maintaining the church's distinct nature and committing the church to independence from the state; Wang was jailed because he determined to worship God alone.⁷ From this perspective, the legacy of Wang's ecclesial stance reveals that the church not only lives out its vocation bearing witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world, but also has the capacity to engage in society and the state in a radically different way. In the West, scholars propose a similar point of view to defend Wang's stance. Thomas Alan Harvey, for example, points out that Wang's rejection of the TSPM was based on his Christian faith rather than on a political position.⁸ Reviewing evangelical readings of Wang, I am convinced by Harvey's view that Wang's imprisonment was a political punishment for his insistence on maintaining an independent church—but it happened because of his faith, and his choices had nothing

集), 154–171; <https://www.chinesepen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/%E7%8E%8B%E6%80%A1%E7%89%A7%E5%B8%88%E6%96%87%E9%9B%86%E5%B3%B3%E7%B3%BB.pdf> (accessed May 3, 2021).

5 Carsten Timothy Vala, *Failing to Contain Religion: The Emergence of a Protestant Movement in Contemporary China* (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008), 66–83.

6 Jing Jing (景净), “Conservation and Sectarian: Analyzing the Early Theological Thought of Wang Mingdao” (保守与避世—浅析王明道早期的神学思想), *Behold* (举目), (March 1, 2013), <https://behold.oc.org/?p=8542> (accessed May 6, 2021).

7 This view is derived from interviews scattered in northern and southern China and conducted between 2003 and 2020.

8 Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief*, 85.

to do with the sociological structure. Contrasting Wang's ministry and imprisonment under the CCP with the ministry and death of Jesus Christ under Roman authority, I perceive Wang's response to the TSPM as part of a necessary proclamatory action and propose that Wang's model of radical action models the politics of Jesus—and that the political nature of his church is defined by the gospel. His church therefore presents a new *polis*: a community established in and through Jesus of Nazareth to stand as a political alternative to the dominant politics of the world and contribute to an alternative identity of a *citizen*.

By identifying Wang as a fundamentalist and indigenous church leader rather than (as some scholars portray him) a sociopolitical figure, this article offers a more nuanced understanding of his Christian belief and his church's public witness. I shall approach his faith practice from an ecclesiological perspective and situate him and his ecclesial activities into a theological and historical context to explore his biblical-theological foundation for this new *polis* and its public witness. I argue that Wang's rejection of the TSPM and his alternative way of engaging with such political issues as imperialism, nationalism, and church-state relations shows that he never withdrew from the world in his time. His church tests the biblical concept of the nature and mission of the church and proclaims that "the church, as redeemed and reordered humanity, presents to the wider world and its structures a picture of the world's own redemptive promise, should it submit to the lordship of Christ."⁹

DECONSTRUCTING THE SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPT AND PRESUMPTIONS OF THE CHURCH

To investigate the underlying cause of the scholarly dispute and more fully comprehend Wang's ecclesial stance, it is crucial to examine the sociological constructs surrounding the church and Wang's account of the church. We can begin with Max Weber's typology of the church-sect forms of Christian community and Ernst Troeltsch's evolved twofold typology as church-sect-mysticism to analyze the issue: we will explore how the two typologies not only plague the biblical-theological construction of

9 Douglas Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 117.

the church and its task but also open the door to a sociological rather than theological approach to viewing the church. Such an analysis provides a powerful tool for understanding and clarifying why scholarly accounts of Wang's ecclesial stance and practice have become questionable and subject to debate. Specifically, the two typologies based on sociological assumptions primarily differentiate between churches and sects: They identify churches as large, universalistic, and objective organizations, stressing that they are able to "have an influence on institutions of a universal character"; sects are small, particularistic, and subjective entities characterized by the withdrawal of believers from the world.¹⁰

This differentiation is an attempt to account for church and sect as different groups that have different attitudes toward the "wider society" and that subsequently generated two distinct groups of social ethics.¹¹ This church-sect typology critically reflects on religious movements—Christianity is viewed as a religion rather than Christian belief—and their close relationships with society and state. The emergence of the typology therefore changes the ecclesial role of the church by emphasizing its social and political contribution to society, and this leads to mistaking the theological language of the church as being geared toward sociological ends. With the church-versus-sect background in mind, one might make sense of why Wang Yi and Vala politicize Wang's church and his stance to define his church's relationship to society and the state. Jing treats Wang's church as a sect exclusively and depicts it as sectarian—irresponsible in society, which denies the church's social participation.

Wang Yi describes Christian belief in sociological terms, suggesting that the church, by its nature, represents a kind of public life of faith; Chinese house churches as religious groups or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are connected to civil society and have the capacity to play the role of civil organizations in Chinese society.¹² From a sociopolitical perspective, house churches as NGOs may complement both government rule and civil society development by influencing the legal system, private

10 Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 336, 484.

11 Philip D. Kenneson, *Beyond Sectarian: Re-imagining Church and World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 11.

12 Liu Tongsu and Wang Yi, *Observations of China's House Churches in Cities*, 38, 28–29.

property protections, civil rights movements, and freedom of association; they may also offer a counterforce to a polity by performing social services and promoting alternative values.¹³ With these sociopolitical assumptions regarding Christianity, Wang even employs the Christian concept of covenant to develop his notion of constitutionalism being used to dismantle Chinese authoritarianism and create a liberal democracy in China; he also takes this approach to leverage his church to attack other churches and the government.¹⁴ Likewise, affirming the institutional role of the church as manifested in the Western context, Vala goes so far as to point out that house churches can contribute to the development of civil society in mainland China by offering Christian values,¹⁵ suggesting that house churches, acting as civil society organizations outside the state structure, “contribute to a civil society that offers alternative values, defends church interests, and seeks to limit state authority.”¹⁶

I challenge applying the sociological approach to the church. Christianity is not a religion; it is a set of beliefs and practices that, in its own biblical-theological and historical reality, provides the context to recount the role of the church.¹⁷ The danger of the sociological approach is that it redefines the ecclesiological concept of the church and forms the basis of describing the church in terms of the sociology of religion—thereby stripping away the theology of the church as a mission shaped by the gospel to the world. In other words, when the ecclesiological concept of the church is reduced to a sociological description of what the church is, its theological aspects are partially neglected. For example, the church becomes a kind of ideal of community or organization focusing on a social agenda such as social reform and cultivation of civil society, while it ignores the key aspect that

13 Liu and Wang, *Observations*, 28–29.

14 For details, see Wang Yi, *On Constitutionalism: Changes in Concepts and Systems* (宪政主义：观念与制度的转捩) (Jinan: Shandong Renmin Press, 2006) (济南：山东人民出版社，2006); Wang Yi, “The Possibility of Political Theology: Christianity and Liberalism,” *Chinese Law & Religion Monitor* 8, no. 1 (January 2012): 96–121.

15 Carsten T. Vala, “Protestant Christianity and Civil Society in Authoritarian China: The Impact of Official Churches and Unregistered ‘Urban Churches’ on Civil Society Development in the 2000s,” *China Perspectives* 91, no. 3 (January 2012): 43–52; Vala, *Failing to Contain Religion*.

16 Vala, “Protestant Christianity”: 49.

17 Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 73.

the church is about God's people formed by the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus gathering to worship him and evangelize people. At the same time, the church-sect typology tends to exclude certain doctrinal factors, such as sacraments as marks of the church, which might not be emphasized due to the church's organizational nature.

Furthermore, this shift of discipline and methodology from theology to sociology of religion, coupled with a focus on the conceptual evolution of the church, has resulted in the vital practices of the church being excluded from the ecclesiological field. This changes our perception of the role of the church and its place in the world. Under this redefined institutional character, one might assume that what an organization should do and what the church should do are identical; the church is treated as a social organization. How, then, can we understand the church as integral to traditional ecclesiology while emphasizing the significance of its institutional character and assuming the church has a substantive role to play in politics and in addressing urgent social issues? This tends to focus on the role of church as being more about Christians' sociopolitical responsibilities and less about the church's distinctive social existence, sacrificial witness, and evangelization. It is a perspective, when applied to church-state relations in the current post-Christendom era, that has become even more complex and controversial.

Additionally, using the structure of the church-sect dichotomy to account for Wang Mingdao's stance is not helpful—it not only misreads and misinterprets his ecclesiology, which is grounded in the Bible and in fundamentalist theology, but it also removes his church's ecclesiological aspects. Taking a close look at Wang's work, we can see that he viewed the church not as an institution but as a fellowship of the regenerated¹⁸ and “a people who were called out from the fallen world to follow God, serve God, and worship God.”¹⁹ According to Wang, while people still live in the world, they do not belong to it and should not conform to the pattern of the world;²⁰ the existence of the church is about proclaiming the

18 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures of Wang Mingdao* 《王明道文库》 (Taiwan: Conservative Baptist Press, 1978) (台湾: 浸宣出版社, 1978) 5: 130.

19 Wang Mingdao, “Crises of the Modern Church” (现代教会的危险), in *The Spiritual Food Quarterly* 《灵食季刊》 (Taiwan: Ganlan Huaxuan, 2012) (台湾: 橄榄华宣) 21: 3.

20 Wang Mingdao, “Crises” 21, no. 7.

gospel and instructing God's people to live out a holy life to witness the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.²¹ But this does not mean that the church is always holy and obedient to God; in reality, it is full of sinners.²² Wang's concept of the church explicitly denotes the social, cultural, and political realities, the identity of being God's people, and what it means to be a distinctive people formed by the gospel; it has nothing to do with the church as a sociological concept. By its nature, the church is founded in the gospel itself and reflects the biblical demands of holy living, witness, and the cross.

Wang uses language similar to that of John Howard Yoder, who notes that "holy living" demonstrates "the separateness of a called people and the distinctiveness of their social existence,"²³ reminding the people that their identity is defined by their Lord alone and that what they do is judged by God's Word. "Witness" signifies that a called people hear and accept the gospel as well as imitate Jesus Christ like the earliest evangelists by taking the way of the cross to follow that costly path. There is no doubt that the action links to potential martyrdom, as "the world hates God's people and His faithful servants even in the Christian country."²⁴ The terminology of martyr and witness are correlated, as "the word 'martyr' comes from a stem that means simply 'witness'; the resultant meaning, 'one who suffers,' is derivative."²⁵ According to the biblical narrative, "witness" is essential for reflecting the gospel story that the Lord's radical mission was rejected and his disciples were persecuted by the world. However, the gospel message remains the same, in that taking up the cross to follow Jesus Christ is central to witness and martyrdom and is of necessity the work of witness, which is not necessarily confined only to the early church. "The cross" confirms the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as his self-

21 Wang Mingdao, "Crises" 22, no. 9.

22 Wang Mingdao, "Crises" 21, no. 3.

23 John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1994), 80; Wang Mingdao, "Crises of the Modern Church," Vol. 21, 3, 7.

24 Wang Mingdao, "The Way of Balaam" (巴兰的道路), in *The Spiritual Food Quarterly* 《灵食季刊》 (Tai Wan: Ganlan Huaxuan, 2012) (台湾: 橄榄华宣), Vol. 108, 18-19.

25 James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Witness: Systematic Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 348.

sacrificial redemption, which shapes the mission of the church and also foreshadows the church's stance and practice when facing hostility from the world. In summary, the three marks of holy living, witness, and the cross define the church's identity and its relationship to society and the state; that is, the existence of the church per se displays its indispensable dimensions of sociopolitical nonconformity and is therefore unwelcome in the world.

²⁶ These marks also set up the task of the church as not to change or make the world, but to proclaim the gospel, evangelize unbelievers, and instruct on how to live out new lives.

This view illustrates why Wang's radical rejection of the TSPM fits more into the biblical picture rather than any modern sociological category. His rejection is not an accidental echo of the gospel story but a way of being faithful to it as witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, thereby allowing the church to present itself from its very origin as a political body—a *polis*—a community that offers an alternative political way to carry on the Great Commission and influence society prophetically. This alternative political body is defined by the gospel, and it constantly calls people to be part of the gospel, a joyful call to be baptized into a new *polis* called church, to join a continued countercultural movement since the apostolic age.²⁷

For Wang, being this type of new *polis* lends the ability to confront the TSPM with a political alternative. Although he and the church were persecuted because they refused to compromise, their suffering becomes today's house church's inspiration, encouraging Chinese Christians to stand firm in faith regardless of circumstance. Wang's powerful witness reveals that this "sectarian" church has no desire to withdraw from the world; rather, the church is coupled with a prophetic critique of society and the state that tells the truth. His witness is therefore not marginal, but a central part of the heritage of the Christian tradition. It proves that the primary task of the church is not to be a social organization working for the betterment of the state, but to be the church "to proclaim the gospel and tell people that Jesus Christ, the One who died on the cross and resurrected

²⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, 86-87.

²⁷ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something Is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 30.

was their only Savior.”²⁸ As Wang constantly stressed, Jesus Christ gave the critical mission to his church before his ascension, and he knew this was the most remarkable and urgent task to carry out. The early church started this mission, actively preached the gospel, and fought the good fight through difficult times; today’s church should take the gospel seriously and carry out the same mission in the world.²⁹

BEING AN ALTERNATIVE POLIS: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Wang’s ecclesiology, when compared with that of other Chinese theologians and church leaders in his time, is profoundly unique and thought-provoking. The unique idea of being an alternative *polis* to distinguish itself from others while impacting society was shaped by Wang’s particular context and biblical-theological perspectives. Although born into a Christian family and having attended a Christian school, his attitude toward the church was hardly positive. In his autobiography, Wang notes that since he became a Christian at the age of fourteen he had observed that “all kinds of sinful practices in society had their exact counterparts in the church.”³⁰ Many pastors and preachers at the time had a poor understanding of Scripture and discouraged testimonies of being Christian both in the church and in society.³¹ Experiencing the church’s corruption and crisis cemented Wang’s commitment to Scripture as well as his belief that the church was ripe for a needed revolution in accordance with biblical teaching.³² This revolution would begin with an adequate critical understanding of Scripture and an examination of believers’ lives in accordance with Scripture.

Wang believed that the Bible was without error and fault in all its teaching; Scripture alone was the means for the church to constantly test whether the church’s message and practice were faithful to biblical teaching, and no other authorities should go beyond it. This principle tests

28 Wang Mingdao, “Crises” 22, no. 9.

29 Ibid, 9–15.

30 Wang Mingdao, *A Stone Made Smooth* (Southampton: Mayflower Christian Books, 1981), 20–21; Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 19–20, 73.

31 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 29.

32 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 73–75.

his own practice and that of his church: When Wang recognized baptism by immersion in the Bible (though he was baptized by sprinkling), he was willing to pay the price of a lost job and a missed opportunity to study abroad to fulfill this ritual.³³ When he established the independent Christian Tabernacle in Beijing, that church refused to celebrate Christmas and participate in the traditions and customs of other churches; Wang argued that since the Bible was the word of God, all these man-made matters were foreign to the Bible and must be measured against it.

He concluded that “whatever the Bible says, I will accept. Whatever the Bible does not say, I will not take them even a little bit...no matter how many people add some traditions other than the Bible, I believe in everything in the Bible, no less and no more.”³⁴ This stance convinced him of the righteousness of building a nondenominational church. Though Wang holds the Bible firmly and gives absolute fidelity to the biblical text, regarding Scripture as the sole infallible rule of faith and practice, it is worth noting that Wang expressed no desire to develop a doctrine of the authority of the Word to discuss the relationships between subordinate authorities and the authority of the Scriptures; his biblical approach is more text-focused and christologically centered. However, he implicitly presupposes the authority from the Bible for preachers to rebuke people and ask them to repent according to the example of Old Testament prophets. To some degree, Wang pictured himself as similar to those prophets and presumably modeled his ministry and preaching accordingly.³⁵

To develop a holy church that distinguishes itself from others, Wang underscored that those who converted should live new lives in Christ and be holy in character and deed. The idea of becoming a holy church to witness Jesus Christ was, for Wang, influenced indirectly by the Western Holiness Movement and its holiness theology. Leung Ka-lun makes a similar point, suggesting it was Watchman Nee that had influenced many Chinese indigenous church leaders, including Wang.³⁶ Nee’s spiritual terms,

33 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 53-55.

34 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 71.

35 Richard R. Cook, *Fundamentalism and Modern Culture in Republican China: The Popular Language of Wang Mingdao, 1900-1991* (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2003), 123.

36 Liang Jialin (梁家麟), *Evangelists and Revivalists of Modern China* (华人教会与奋兴布道家) (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1999) (香港: 建道神学院, 1999), 43-44.

such as “born again,” and holiness theological doctrines are evident in Wang’s sermons and works. Wang discussed the concept of “born again” in detail and considered it a significant spiritual requirement, as it was still easy for believers to fall into sin after conversion. He offered pastoral instruction for those who sinned; if they sincerely repented and possessed faith, they could find forgiveness and restoration from God by God’s grace and the Holy Spirit’s work.³⁷ He hence emphasized the importance of repentance and the work of the Holy Spirit because sincere repentance for and confession of failures could bring sinners to trust in God for forgiveness through the Holy Spirit’s works. Wang also discovered scriptural support for this belief, citing John 3:8 to articulate that new lives reveal a living faith as surely as fruit reveals good deeds; Scripture teaches that attributes such as faithfulness, love, and kindness are to be manifested by believers to prove that the Lord in whom they believe is true; in contrast, Scripture condemns such attitudes as greed, jealousy, and unfilial piety and prohibits dishonesty, adultery, gossip, and so forth.³⁸

Apart from the biblical approach, Wang particularly appealed to the doctrine of the second coming of Christ to confirm that holy living and a zeal to evangelize the world were appropriate, as his return would fulfill all prophecy.³⁹ To pursue a holy church in a practical way, Wang took his church members’ lifestyles seriously and set strict criteria for membership such that no one was allowed to be baptized until they clearly showed real fruits of salvation.⁴⁰ This kept his church small, yet allowed it to exert considerable influence on Christians nationwide. Additionally, the concept of holy living is also in perfect harmony with Wang’s Confucian ethic: Live a virtuous life. He received a sophisticated education in the Chinese classics while studying at a London Missionary Society school.⁴¹ He never shied away from his Confucian background, naming himself “a disciple of Jesus Christ as well as a disciple of Confucius,” and he commented that “the

37 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures*, 1976, 2: 1-38.

38 Ibid, 11-18.

39 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures*, 1977, 4: 2-13.

40 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 130.

41 Wang Mingdao and Ying Fuk-tsang (邢福增), *Wang Mingdao’s Last Words* 《王明道的最后告白》 (Logos Ministries Ltd., 2013)(基道出版社, 2013), 52.

Bible and the Four Books (四书) laid the foundation for [my] entire life.”⁴² It is not easy to overlook how he adapted and applied the moral teaching of Confucius to inform his approach to merging practical Christian living with Chinese traditional moral norms and virtues; this informs the majority of his works responding to social and moral needs during drastic social change in China.⁴³ Regarding marriage, for example, Wang combines biblical and Chinese tradition to find that arranged marriage (父母之命媒妁之言) is reasonable, but only on the condition that parents and matchmakers are blameless, faithful, and experienced adults and the children agree to the arrangement.⁴⁴

While valuing Confucian ethics, Wang placed a higher value on Christ-centered biblical-theological teaching. As he consistently emphasized, Scripture alone was the ultimate authority for defining the nature, life, and practices of the church. Jesus Christ must be first and foremost for Christian lives; being in Christ is the definition of Christian existence. Since all humans have sinned, without Jesus Christ’s redemption and his revelation of the invisible God’s nature and virtues through his word and deed, people are unable to live holy lives and be his disciples.⁴⁵ Given this, Jesus’s life exemplifies and informs what it means to become the likeness of Christ, and it reveals conformity to Christ’s holy life and death as the norm of discipleship toward which followers of “The Way” press on. Notably, for Wang, Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross is the critical aspect for Christians to imitate, and this was relevant to the political realities of his time. The Christ-oriented discourse of taking the cross to follow Jesus and always being prepared to die for him convinced Wang never to compromise on earthly powers.⁴⁶

42 Wang Mingdao and Ying Fuk-tsang, *Wang Mingdao’s Last Words*, 52-53.

43 Wang Mingdao and Ying Fuk-tsang, *Wang Mingdao’s Last Words*, 99.

44 Wang Mingdao, *Treasuries*, 1998, 1: 174-179, 186. Two articles explore this topic: Ye Jingde (柴敬德), “On Wang Mingdao’s Marriage Theory” (王明道的婚姻生活), in Luo Bingxiang and Zhao Dunhua (罗秉祥和赵敦华编), eds., *Christianity and Modern Sino-Western Culture* 《基督教与近代中西文化》(Beijing: Beijing University) (北京: 北京大学出版社, 2000), 118-194; and Gloria S. Tseng, “Bathsheba as an Object Lesson: Gender, Modernity and Biblical Examples in Wang Mingdao’s Sermons and Writings,” *Studies in World Christianity* 21, no. 1 (April 2015): 52-65.

45 Wang Mingdao, *Treasuries*, 1978, 7: 13-16.

46 Wang Mingdao, *Treasuries* 5: 279-281.

Theologically speaking, Wang's ecclesiology is bound to Christology, and Christology determines his ecclesiology. Christology comprises the biblical teaching of and about Jesus and his ministry, which informs all aspects of the church's distinctive life and mission to the world. Importantly, this christological ecclesiology also links to eschatology, and the lordship of Christ is, at heart, apocalyptic. Evidently, the text from Revelation was Wang's eschatological narrative of salvation: Jesus's incarnation and resurrection already shows that there would be a last day—a day when Jesus would come back and take his bride (the church) to be with him.⁴⁷ Such an eschatological perspective hence calls for the church to separate itself from the world to be holy while participating with Christ in conflict with the structures and powers of the world. This apocalyptic and paradoxical approach reflects the gospel story that the world was created by God; it began and will come to fulfillment through God's action in Jesus Christ.

THE PUBLIC WITNESS OF WANG AND HIS CHURCH

Wang's christological-eschatological ecclesiology may thus represent a significant but alternative form of political challenge in which the church's life and practices are structured to enact a different kind of political witness in the world. Wang's personal life and his church were called to become this witness, which not only illustrates how the politics of Jesus brings a new beginning but also unfolds a politics of hope to encourage Chinese Christians to live faithfully and obediently as people of God in a fallen world facing drastic social and political change. The witness is based on Wang's application of Jesus's message to social concerns rather than on his use of social concerns to justify a reading of the message. In Wang's time, China experienced dramatic change, facing the challenges of mass nationalism, foreign invasion, tensions and conflicts between the Christian and non-Christian Chinese, and tensions between Chinese Christians and Western missionaries.⁴⁸ As a Christian, Wang developed his own views of how society might respond to overwhelming ecclesial, social, and political pressures. But his approach from within the church represents a departure

47 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 4: 50.

48 Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), xi.

from that of other young people in his generation; others passionately joined the May Fourth Movement and the Anti-Christian Movement, because Christianity was regarded as an arm of foreign domination introduced to China under the wings of military and economic coercion.⁴⁹

Wang's ecclesiastically political reaction was to speak out against church and government corruption and preach the importance of the independence of the Chinese church, thereby representing a forerunner of Chinese indigenous churches that rejected the authority of Western missionaries. In 1925, he founded an independent, nondenominational church without the help of foreign missionaries and funding; it was autonomous in its local operation and leadership, and it was focused on Chinese Christians preaching to the Chinese populace. Unlike Watchman Nee, Wang never created additional churches elsewhere in China to promote his ecclesial stance and practice, yet his ministerial sphere was not limited to his own church. He worked closely with other Chinese indigenous evangelists, and they travelled throughout China to preach on the themes of repentance and salvation.⁵⁰ His gospel message and mission travels greatly influenced today's biblically conservative preaching style and theological views in both the house church and the TSPM church, which provide testimony to his impact. His ongoing legacy is manifested in the way most house churches operate independently regardless of political favor toward the church.

Nor was his public ministry limited to preaching, as he wrote for and edited the Christian newspaper *Spiritual Food Quarterly* (灵食季刊) for more than a decade to engage with the public and with social and ethical issues arising from the tumultuous social changes of his day. The newspaper had become a powerful tool to provide those wrestling with family and social issues with specific Christian practical guidance and positive promotion of their faith, thus contributing to the public sphere in a different voice. In this context, under the influence of the May Fourth and New Culture movements, intellectuals criticized classical Chinese ideas and revolted against the three bonds and five constants (三纲五常) that characterize the Confucian system of ethics. They also launched a

49 Timothy Brook, "Toward Independence: Christianity in China under the Japanese Occupation, 1937-1945," in Daniel H. Bays ed., *Christianity in China*, 318.

50 Wu Liming, *Christianity and Social Changes in China*, 139.

literary revolution, a family revolution, and a Chinese Renaissance based on Western ideals to bring intellectual freedom to individuals.⁵¹ Hu Shi (1891–1962) exemplifies the New Culture that advocates dismantling old-style literary conventions rooted in Confucian “rationality” that had suppressed emotions and genuine feelings for so long.⁵² Others promoted free love and sexuality, identifying liberty with free expression, free marriage, and gender equality. This motivated young people to seek to free themselves from the shackles of familial authority or any other repressive authority, thereby creating familial and social chaos. Those still faithful to Confucian tradition struggled to accommodate this radical freedom, as there seemed to be no room to negotiate.

Although Wang had reservations about this revolution, he certainly did not criticize everything it produced. His approach to these social issues was to seek practical guidance and wisdom from Scripture. As Gloria S. Tseng notes, he necessarily departed from key aspects of traditional norms or ethical rules without embracing all the revolutionary ideas when discerning the explicit teachings of Jesus or the apostles on these matters.⁵³ Regarding relationships between men and women, one might see in his letters his pastoral heart and cautious attitude toward the revolutionary idea of free-love marriage and family relations, as well as his straightforward warning to young men and women to live holy and blameless lives as people who profess the name of Christ.⁵⁴ He even portrayed his own marriage story as testament to the idea that Confucian ethics and the teaching of Scripture were not necessarily in conflict if one loves and respects Scripture.⁵⁵ His marriage testimony proves that it “was a new ideal marriage, neither that advocated by May Fourth writers nor that prescribed by Confucian patriarchy.”⁵⁶ His message to approach the revolution offered a new insight

51 Edmund S.K. Fung, “The Idea of Freedom in Modern China Revisited: Plural Conceptions and Dual Responsibilities,” *Modern China* 32, no. 4 (October 2006): 459–460.

52 Elisabeth Forster, *1919—the Year That Changed China: A New History of the New Culture Movement* (Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter, Oldenbourg, 2018), 2, 13.

53 Tseng, “Bathsheba as an Object Lesson”: 60.

54 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures*, 1976, 1: 48–49.

55 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 172–198.

56 Tseng, “Bathsheba as an Object Lesson”: 62.

for those who lived between the old world that was waning and the new world that was emerging.

In wartime, Wang's politics of witness required him to refuse all cooperation other than agreeing to serve God alone. While Beijing fell under foreign control from 1938 to 1945 as Japan attempted to dominate Asia and the Pacific by establishing the New Order of the Orient, the Japanese Ministry of Information required all publications to reproduce propaganda supporting the Japanese military. Wang courageously chose to continue publishing his newspaper without the required slogans because they did not represent his Christian views and his church's stance.⁵⁷ When war broke out between Japan and Western powers in 1941, the Japanese religious strategy for cutting off Western influence from China and controlling Western missionary activities in China⁵⁸ was to establish the North China Christian Federation (NCCF) (华北中华基督教团) that would unify Western missionary churches and churches operated by Chinese Christians. Since Wang's church was not exempt, it was pressured to join the NCCF lest Wang be arrested and the church sealed. It was a difficult journey for him to overcome this coercion, describing that fearful experience as it "felt like he had walked in the kiln more than 300 days."⁵⁹ He struggled profoundly over whether to compromise for the sake of safeguarding his church, which was starting to come apart as some congregants attempted to persuade him to comply, and some were afraid of going back to the church.⁶⁰ When Wang received the NCCF invitation letter, the scene of Jesus in Garden of Gethsemane came to his mind: Jesus underwent the agony and was arrested the night before his crucifixion.⁶¹ This resonated with his mixed feelings about surrendering to God or to a human power, and he became willing to be arrested or even die for Christ—

57 John Gill, "Wang Ming-Dao (1900-1991): Faithful amid Political Coercion," *Ministry*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/wang-ming-dao-faithful-political-coercion> (accessed May 15, 2021); Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief*, 44.

58 Brook, "Toward Independence," 331–332.

59 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 150.

60 Xing Fuzeng, "Wang Mingdao and The North China Christian Union Chinese Christian's Resistance and Collaboration with Japan in Occupied Area" (王明道与华北中华基督教团—沦陷区教会人士抵抗与合作的个案研究), *Jian Dao Journal of Bible and Theology* (建道学刊), no. 17 (January 2002): 22–23.

61 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 142.

but he was also concerned about his church's future and his elderly mother, and so he remained undecided.⁶²

In his trembling, prayers brought the power and strength for him to face unprecedented danger, and Scripture told him that believers and nonbelievers should not be united. As the NCCF included nonbelievers, uniting with them would destroy his church's goal of being holy and witnessing to a fallen society. Wang decided to take the cross to follow Jesus; he could not betray God and surrender even in the face of threats of arrest and the closing of his church.⁶³ Wang also believed that his independent church had no financial and personal connections with foreign churches—thus already meeting the Japanese requirement of separating from Western missionaries—so there was no reason for the Japanese to charge him. Wang's unshakable faith took root in God and his Word, and Wang refused to join the NCCF. The result of his courageous confrontation with the Japanese army was that he won the battle—the Japanese took no action against him or his church—though the journey was full of furious storms and sleepless nights. This fight won him respect and a reputation as a prophet of God and fearless believer. A man sent by the Japanese to monitor Wang's activities became so impressed with Wang's faith and courage that, after the war, he confessed his true identity to Wang and served the church as a cleaner to atone for what he had done.⁶⁴

Wang stood firmly against foreign missionaries and the Japanese while holding an uncompromising belief in preserving a distinctive church to witness to God. This foreshadowed his future refusal to join the TSPM when the communists came to power. The CCP believed Christianity was an instrument of Western imperialism that oppressed China because it was historically linked to the invasion by the West, and the urgent task was to cut off all Western ties and remove all foreign influences from the Chinese churches and organizations. At the same time, the CCP would educate Chinese Christians to love the motherland and support the new communist leadership.⁶⁵ The CCP's religious strategy was to

62 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 150.

63 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 148.

64 Xing Fuzeng, "Wang Mingdao": 31.

65 Wallace C. Merwin and Francis P. Jones, eds., *Documents of the Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in Communist China* (New York:

unify all churches under the leadership of the TSPM, but Wang, facing this unexpected test, took the same stance as he had with the Japanese: his church was already independent of foreign ties and therefore already met the CCP's requirement. This experience stripped him of his cowardice and united him with the courage and wisdom of the gospel and his trust in God for another tough battle.⁶⁶

It is no surprise that Wang refused to sign the Christian Manifesto—calling for Christians to support the CCP leadership—because TSPM leaders, in his view, represented the modernist theological position that did not believe in Jesus Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection nor that all Scripture is divinely inspired.⁶⁷ According to his primary principle that believers should not yoke themselves to nonbelievers, union with the TSPM would mean compromising these nonnegotiable tenets of Christianity and lead to a poor witness to both Christians and non-Christians. He therefore clearly expressed his position that his church was to serve God and be a witness to a fallen society, and for this he would be willing to pay any price to preserve the independence of the church, without compromise. He fiercely criticized the modernist false beliefs, pinpointing their biblical and theological errors in his significant articles, "Truth or Poison?," "We, Because of Faith!," "Obey Men or Obey God?," and "Resolute Attitude and Triumphant Life."⁶⁸ In the end, Wang was arrested and accused of committing the political crime of creating scandal to destroy the TSPM. Under the pressure and fear, he failed the first battle when he confessed to crimes he did not commit and promised to join the TSPM in exchange for his and his wife's release. This failure brought him shame and regret, to the point where he began contemplating suicide. However, he eventually found restoration in Christ and retracted his confession. As a result, he was jailed for twenty years but remained faithful in prison and trusted in God without doubt and fear. Wang's suffering and faithfulness represent a powerful witness for Jesus at any cost. His failure reveals that no martyrs desire to suffer or die unless it is necessary; his faith exemplifies the path

National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1963), iii.

66 Wang Mingdao, *Treasures* 5: 149.

67 Wang Mingdao, *The Fifty Years* 《五十年来》 (Hong Kong: Christian Literature Crusade, 1971) (晨星书屋, 1967), Appendix, 17-44.

68 Wang Mingdao, *The Fifty Years*, Appendix, 1-55.

to approach and follow the gospel. As one of the significant martyrs of the church, Wang inspired many believers through his stance and example of strong faith and suffering for the politics of Jesus Christ,⁶⁹ and this provides encouragement for Chinese Christians to pursue his path.

CONCLUSION

Wang's life was fully devoted to building and embodying a holy and faithful church, separate from the ways of the world, to witness to the life, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus. He challenged foreign missionaries, the Japanese army, and the CCP in his refusals to participate in the earthly political order. In his vision, the church should not align itself with any organization or the state; nor does it exist to provide an ethos for them since they have their own agendas. But the church stands as a political alternative to reveal to the world that another kind of life is possible for those that have been formed by the politics of Jesus Christ. The church's purpose, therefore, is to exist as a contrasting society with an integrity peculiar to itself in accordance with the apocalyptic imagination that the church is in the world but not of the world. Given this kind of church, it has the capacity to offer a prophetic voice to remind God's people that a church is not a secular political agent or social organization that participates in or guides politics. However, this does not mean that a church should be an apolitical "spiritual" body, withdrawing from the world; rather, the church should stand as an alternative to the dominant politics of the world to proclaim the politics of Jesus Christ, contribute to an alternative identity of a *citizen*, and shape the ongoing relationships between God's people and the surrounding people. Following this path might lead one to pay the cost of discipleship, as Wang has exemplified by embodying the message of Christ crucified. In this journey of taking the cross to follow Jesus, one might be fearful, one might tremble, one might fail; but one's failure and weakness are their "glory" because they share in the power of Jesus Christ.

About author

ZHAO Wenjuan (PhD, Hong Kong Baptist University) is an academic program leader and researcher at Oxford Center for Religion and Public Life, Oxford, UK.

69 Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 203.