

WANG YI
AND OTHERS

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FAITHFUL
DISOBEDIENCE

**WRITINGS ON CHURCH AND
STATE FROM A CHINESE HOUSE
CHURCH MOVEMENT**



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PART I

OUR HOUSE CHURCH MANIFESTO

In late 2010, Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church compiled a book called 我们的家庭教会立场 (women de jiating jiaohui lichang). Translated literally, this title reads Our House Church Standpoint, or more literarily, Our House Church Manifesto. The book contains writings from three of China's most prominent house churches—Early Rain Covenant Church, Shouwang Church, and Zion Church (the latter two both in Beijing), demonstrating that though these churches represent different ecclesiological commitments, they are united in their stance rejecting submission to China's state-sanctioned church agency, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The early 2000s were important years for house churches in China, and several events convinced the churches represented by Wang Yi's book that a particular house church identity needed to be studied, honored, and preserved.

Two years prior, the Sichuan Earthquake of 2008 catalyzed house churches across the country into rapidly organizing a response to the humanitarian needs of western Sichuan. Throughout these relief efforts, house churches acted publicly in uncharted ways and were visible both locally in person and nationally online providing aid.¹ This level of organization and public presence did not quietly dissipate in the following years; rather, the momentum among churches in urban China continued, producing various social, educational, denominational, ecumenical, and theological movements.

Meanwhile, the global Christian community prepared for the third congress of the Lausanne Movement. The Lausanne Movement connects global church leaders in order to further the cause of evangelism and missions. The first congress took place in 1974 in Lausanne, Switzerland, and is considered a pivotal moment in modern church

¹Li Ma and Jin Li, *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church: A Sociological Portrait of Christians in Mainland China* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 106-7.

history for uniting the church for the work of the Great Commission. A second congress occurred in 1989 in Manila, the Philippines.

The Cape Town Congress in 2010 was carefully planned so that a fuller picture of the global reality of the church would be represented, with particular focus given to the voices of the Majority World. More than two hundred Chinese delegates from house churches were invited to participate in what would have been the largest delegation in attendance; however, when the delegates attempted to travel to Cape Town, Chinese authorities stopped them at various airports across the country and seized their passports. As a delegate, Wang Yi was detained for four hours and not permitted to travel. As occurred in Manila in 1989, the Chinese delegation's two hundred seats were left empty during congress proceedings and the Lausanne Movement conducted a special time of prayer for the church in China. The Chinese delegation sent a note to the congress communicating that they accepted their government's decision peacefully and with hope in Christ. The message quoted several passages from Scripture, including Philippians 1:29, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake."

China's Ministry of International Affairs released a statement clarifying the reason for its decision to detain the delegation—congress organizers had overlooked inviting participants from the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. A statement from the government read, "This action publicly challenges the principle of independent, autonomous, domestically organized religious associations, and therefore represents a rude interference in Chinese religious affairs." Failing to invite delegates from the TSPM while including the house churches, which have no legal identity in China, was viewed as a politically subversive act.

2010 also proved to be a significant year for Beijing Shouwang Church (北京守望教会, Beijing Shouwang jiaohui), a large unregistered congregation founded in 1993 and pastored by Jin Tianming (金天明).² In the early 2000s, Shouwang was raided by police and told to register with the government. Jin Tianming interpreted government regulations to mean he could seek registration with the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) without joining the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, which he attempted to do in 2006. Due to its size, the congregation began to have a difficult time finding large enough spaces in which to meet. In 2008, Shouwang's registration application was officially denied, and in 2009 police began raiding the congregation and harassing members' employers. The congregation was prevented from meeting in their rental property and began meeting outdoors in parks as their struggle to find

²Translated literally, *shouwang* means "watchmen."

a venue intensified. In 2010, Shouwang raised 27 million RMB (4.12 million USD) from among its thousand members to purchase its own property. However, according to Shouwang, after members of the church were stopped from joining the Lausanne Congress, relations with the government deteriorated further. In 2011, the government stopped Shouwang from occupying its property, which the church claims was purchased legally. In response, Shouwang declared it would begin conducting public worship services outdoors in a prominent city square. Jin Tianming and several church leaders were promptly placed under house arrest and other church members were repeatedly detained.

In addition to including chapters from Shouwang's leaders in his manifesto, Wang Yi included a chapter from Jin Mingri (金明日), the senior pastor of Zion Church (锡安教会, *xi an jiaohui*), one of the largest house churches in Beijing, and founder of China Christian Theological Seminary. Before leaving to join the house church, Jin Mingri was a pastor within the TSPM. He was one of the first government-approved seminary graduates after the TSPM was reinstated following the Cultural Revolution. At the time Wang Yi compiled the manifesto, Zion was a "public" urban house church, unregistered with the TSPM. It had over 1,500 attendees and six meeting places in office buildings across Beijing.

The chapters in part one are translations of Wang Yi's *Our House Church Manifesto*. Whereas the chapters in parts two and three of this book were mostly adapted from spoken contexts, the chapters in part one were all originally written for various journals or books, making this section the densest and most complex. After first compiling his manifesto in 2010, Wang Yi revised it in 2015 to include Early Rain's "95 Theses." With the exception of chapter six, which has been excerpted by the editors in order to bring it closer in length to the other chapters of this book, the manifesto has been reproduced in full.

The manifesto demonstrates Jin Tianming and Jin Mingri's influence on Wang Yi's understanding of the history of the house church, as well as the importance of this history for shaping and forming the identity of many contemporary urban house churches in China. There are several main themes to be found in *Our House Church Manifesto*. First, it seeks to clarify what the tradition of the house church is and how it is different from the TSPM. Second, it seeks to explain why the churches represented by the manifesto are determined to continue promoting this tradition and refuse to submit to the TSPM. Third, the manifesto calls other house churches to join the authors, submitting to the kingship of Jesus Christ alone as the head of the church in rejection of nationalistic idolatry.

WHY WE ARE A HOUSE CHURCH

WANG YI

The following document is a pastoral letter written by Wang Yi to his congregation following the detention of the Chinese delegation traveling to Cape Town, South Africa for the third Lausanne Congress. Wang Yi's pastoral letters were usually first emailed directly to his congregation, then posted online for the general public. An excerpt of this article was also published on The Kosmos, a Chinese online journal of theology and culture.

This chapter outlines Wang Yi's understanding of what the church is, his theological arguments for the separation of church and state, and the history of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. At the heart of Wang Yi's theology is a question: Who has ultimate authority over the church? He believes that the various answers to this question fundamentally define the differences between China's state-run and house churches.

To my fellow communicants of Early Rain Covenant Church,

Peace. I'm thankful that on the fifteenth of this month, some brothers and sisters came very early to my home to pray, sing praises, and experience being stopped at the airport together with us. Many more brothers and sisters truly cared for us, praying for us and the other attendees. My wife, Jiang Rong, said you were like angels, embodying the Lord's comfort for our family.

This time, because the government feared the participation of Chinese house church pastors at the Third Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization, they stopped its citizens from departing on a large scale. In substance, this is a conflict between God's call to the church for "world evangelization" and the official doctrine of so-called self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation.¹ The spokesman from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ma Chaoxu, said that the

¹See "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" in the glossary.

Lausanne meeting's "secret communications and invitations to those outside of the legitimate Chinese church" (meaning the Three-Self church) violated the state's principle of a "self-governed church." It is a crude interference in "China's religious affairs."²

The Lord is using this incident to underscore again to every Chinese Christian the spiritual conflict between the house churches and the Three-Self churches. In the past, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement had also contacted the Lausanne organizing committee in hopes of participating. But the foundation of connection within the Lord's church is not based on might or power (Zechariah 4:6), but rather on a shared confession (Ephesians 4:5-6). The Lausanne Covenant upholds an evangelical perspective, believing in the authority of the Bible and the universality of gospel mission: "whole gospel, whole church, whole world."³ This is in direct contradiction with the Communist Party's United Front Work Department and the State Administration for Religious Affairs principles. Moreover, the thirteenth point in the Lausanne Covenant says, "It is the God-appointed duty of every government to secure conditions of peace, justice and liberty in which the Church may obey God, serve the Lord Jesus Christ, and preach the gospel without interference," and it calls the church to "express our deep concern for all who have been unjustly imprisoned, and especially for those who are suffering for their testimony to the Lord Jesus. We promise to pray and work for their freedom. At the same time, we refuse to be intimidated by their fate."

Therefore, if those appointed by the Communist Party as "legitimate representatives of the Chinese church" carefully read through this statement, they could never in good faith and conscience sign it. This shows that they stand in the synagogue of Satan (Revelation 2:9), sitting in Moses' seat (Matthew 23:2). Because of their worldly "religious affairs," they dare not join together and agree with the sons and daughters of the Most High. This is why we believe that the "Three-Self" is a government monopoly within a religious industrial complex, submitting to the cause of political power, and is therefore not the Lord's church—because "the church" by nature is not a tangible organization but rather a group of spiritual

²The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the People's Republic of China is an executive department under the State Council of the Chinese government. This agency is responsible for crafting foreign policies, decisions, and statements in regard to the PRC. It also negotiates and signs foreign treaties and agreements, dispatches foreign affairs representatives to other countries, and represents the PRC's interests in the United Nations and other international organizations.

³The Lausanne Covenant is widely regarded as one of the most significant documents on evangelism and mission in modern church history. The document emerged from the First Lausanne Congress in 1974, with John Stott as its chief architect. The covenant has gained significant traction among urban house churches in China.

saints within God's invisible kingdom, chosen from every tongue, tribe, and nation (John 18:36).

At the same time, even though there are numerous church buildings (religious activity centers) within the "Three-Self" system, there is not a single independent "church" among them. The evil religious industrial complex controls all, because the schemes of Satan are to destroy the "local church." In reality, in today's China, only among the house churches can one find a true and independent "local church."

Today, why do we insist on the path of a house church, why must we warn those believers who have been abducted into the "Three-Self" to quickly break away from the sin of Jeroboam, worshiping the golden calves that were in Bethel and Dan (2 Kings 10:29), instead calling them to know the Bible and long for the truth, lest God's people are destroyed for their lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:6); why must we warn those "Three-Self" pastors who are walking in the ways of Cain, peddling God's Word (2 Corinthians 2:17), and rushing for profit into Balaam's error (Jude 1:11) to thoroughly repent; and why do we ask God to have mercy on those members and workers of the body within the "Three-Self" who are weak and suffer from pangs of conscience, to give them a faith that overcomes the world, in order that they may be right before the Lord, faithful unto death, receiving the crown of life (Revelation 2:10)?

Briefly, this is in view of the teachings of the Bible and the acknowledgment of historical facts:

1. THE FIRST OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS: "YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME" (EXODUS 20:3)

The bride only has one husband, the church only has one head, and the soul only has one king. For believers to truly understand this commandment and take it seriously, in the face of any thing or person that craves dominion or obligation over our lives—whether it is our spouses, parents, or our country or political party—no matter if the request is accompanied with tears or guns, our response is simply this: thus says the Lord, "You will have no other gods before me." Once the church falls into the trap of being ruled by emotions, depending on power, or yielding to politics on matters of doctrine, priesthood, or sacraments, they have worshiped a false god. They will have lost the most beautiful quality of Christ's bride, purity, so that they cease to be the Lord's church.

2. THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE: “RENDER TO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR’S, AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD’S” (MATTHEW 22:21)

On the one hand, God grants the state the power to wield the sword (Romans 13:1-13), maintaining external order and peace; on the other hand, he gives the church keys to the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:19), to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and judge spiritual matters, as “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1). The government has no right to interfere with the faith of its citizens, or the doctrines, priestly vocations, worship, and preaching of churches. We do not accept interference in religious freedom by an atheistic political party’s religious affairs bureau; we do not accept the notion of the Lord’s church submitting to a “managerial department;” we do not accept “religious affairs” as a function of the government. In other words, religious matters never belong to “my country, China,” nor do they belong to the United States, nor South Africa. Real religion (godliness) belongs to Christ, belongs to the world, and belongs to the conscience of every believer.

As long as the government maintains its “theocracy” model—viewing religious affairs as internal governmental matters—violates the church’s keys to the kingdom, and prevents local churches from registering independently via the Civil Affairs Bureau, we are determined to follow in the footsteps of the saints before us, such as Wang Mingdao and Yuan Xiangchen, holding to the house church position unto death. On one hand we obey the government’s legitimate and common governance, respecting the power of its sword; on the other hand, through nonviolent civil disobedience, we will preach the word whether in season or out of season (2 Timothy 4:2). People can be chained, but the gospel cannot be chained (2 Timothy 2:9); the servants may be killed, but our Lord has already risen.

3. ENTRUSTED WITH THE GREAT COMMISSION (MATTHEW 28:18-20; LUKE 24:46-48)

Because our sovereign God has given the church the rights and responsibility to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth, it means that the spiritual kingdom of Christ is higher than any nation state because Christ has no passport, faith knows no national boundaries, and truth knows no skin color. Without Western missionaries, where would Chinese Christians be? Therefore, we resolutely oppose the “self-propagating” principle of the Three-Self, the sham of “designated message, designated location, and designated people,” and the so-called religious freedom guidelines. The half-century “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” is an antichrist movement precisely because it does not recognize a public faith

and the existence of a kingdom that is above nation-states, and it attempts to set up a “nationalist church” via the regime. This is a scheme of Satan to use China to destroy the Lord’s church. But God intended it for good (Genesis 50:20), using over a half century of persecution to instead raise up, fulfill, and protect the house church.

4. THE HISTORY AND REALITIES OF THE “THREE-SELF PATRIOTIC MOVEMENT”

Many in its ranks are false leaders and teachers who accuse and persecute the church and its workers; these are among the bishops, leaders, and ministers of the “Three-Self” (and its affiliates) at every level to this day. So far, they have not repented and turned from their evil ways; they continue to initiate heretical teachings based on “justification by love,” advocating for religious syncretism through “theological reconstruction” throughout the Three-Self system.⁴ Many local Three-Self churches continue to help their local governments persecute the house churches, following in the shameful ways of Judas—we even dare not pray for them about this sin that leads to death (1 John 5:16). They continue to receive the kind of oversight and compensation that the government gives to official ministers; they organize “political studies,” receiving leadership and teaching from Gentiles; they continue to sing “red songs” in their meetings,⁵ hang the national flag, and approve worshiping the state. True believers should oppose and be greatly alarmed by this following of the religion of the Canaanites, yielding to Baal’s despotic power and backsliding ways.

Someone will say, but we must also love them. Yes, if you walk along this path of being a house church, suffering and paying the price for this lack of freedom, striving to spread the full gospel, working hard to observe the Lord’s way, and walking in the light, then nothing is greater than this love for one’s brother (1 John 2:6-10).

What is true “religious autonomy”? It is precisely holding Jesus as Lord and upholding the Bible. Any “autonomy” outside of Christ is outright rebellion against the Lord, coming from the Evil One. What is true “self-propagation, self-support”? It is believers not being unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and unrighteousness have in common, and what accord does Christ have with Satan? (2 Corinthians 6:14-15)

⁴See “China Christian Council” and “Sinicization of Christianity.”

⁵“Red songs” are songs that praise the Chinese Communist Party and the People’s Republic of China. They are mostly historical in nature, from the revolutionary years surrounding 1949 until the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Therefore, the fifth point of the “Early Rain Confession of Faith” that you and the elders hold to says: “We accept the legacy of the Chinese house church, holding fast to Jesus Christ as the only head of the church, and holding onto the principle of the separation of church and state.”

Brothers and sisters, oh that the Lord would use our lives in this world where the darkness is passing away and the true light is shining (1 John 2:8); that we would be like Martin Luther, saying, “Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.”

By grace, faithful to the Lord,

your fellow servant,

Wang Yi

October 15, 2010

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