

# Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 10

## A Public Theology of the Cross: Pastor Wang Yi as Public Theologian

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Reflection on public theology has developed mainly in the Western world where liberal democratic societies grant the church a voice, albeit a voice that is less welcome today than before. However, as the church grows outside of the West, often under despotic totalitarian regimes, the question remains whether public theological discourse is possible in such environments and, if so, what it may look like. One answer is found in Wang Yi, a well-known pastor and public theologian in communist China. Wang is a prolific writer, but few of his works have been translated into English.<sup>1</sup> This essay will briefly introduce Wang's public theology and suggest what the Western church can learn from this Chinese pastor.

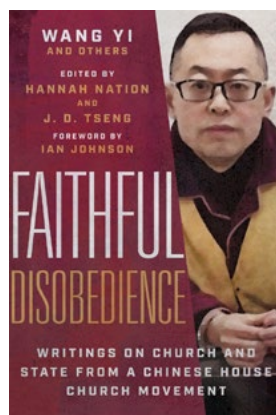
### From Law Scholar to Pastor

As a teenager, Wang Yi (b. 1973) experienced the democracy protests and subsequent government crackdown of the summer of 1989 in his hometown

1 A recent translation of a selection of writings on church and state was published in Hannah Nation and J. D. Tseng, ed., *Faithful Disobedience: Writings on Church and State from a Chinese House Church Movement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022).

in Sichuan. More than any other event, the June 4 massacre shaped the minds of that generation and led Wang to become a civil-rights law scholar in the liberal-leaning city of Chengdu. However, it was Wang's online cultural critiques that gained him recognition and a wider audience throughout China in the early 2000s. For a liberal-minded civil-rights attorney, public intellectual, and holder of a "June fourth complex," it would take more than an inward-focused, pietistic Christianity to attract Wang.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it was a public faith that he learned from other intellectual converts like his friend Yu Jie (b. 1973) that drew his attention to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Wang began attending a Bible study in

2005, through which both he and his wife became Christians. The study became known as Early Rain Fellowship, and it was here that Wang began to preach as early as



2 Li Ma, *Religious Entrepreneurism in China's Urban House Churches: The Rise and Fall of Early Rain Reformed Presbyterian Church*, Routledge Studies in Religion (New York, Routledge, 2019), 35–37.

3 Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 172; Alexander Chow, "A Calvinist Public Theology in Urban China," *International Journal in Public Theology* 8 (2014), 167.

2006. In 2008, Early Rain Fellowship became Early Rain Reformed Church (now known as Early Rain Covenant Church [ERCC]), and Wang became its full-time pastor. However, Wang's move from law scholar to pastor was not a move from cultural critique to quietism but rather one in which Wang reframes his cultural critique in light of Scripture and theology.<sup>4</sup>

### From the Pulpit to the Public

When discussing public theology in places like China under the CCP, it is necessary to point out that no critique or assessment of any sphere of society can be apolitical. As the CCP seeks an autonomous reign over every area of culture and society, public theology becomes political by necessity. In this atmosphere, Wang believes in a public proclamation of Christ's kingship in every area of life, even if that blurs the lines between public and political theology. He explains,

The church will undoubtedly reflect a strong political character in the last days. What is political? As a community, the church operates within a larger community, and the power of this larger community and the logic of public life in it constitute a *de facto* confrontation, *de facto* opposite, *de facto* tit-for-tat, actual spiritual warfare.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, Wang's sermons do not avoid the issues of everyday life in urban China and critiques of a society rife with social problems. Amid a government that seeks to suppress any criticism, Wang preaches openly to societal ills and yet points to the gospel as the answer to those ills. ERCC has been active in community outreach, seeking to start open conversations regarding abortion in a country where abortion was often government-mandated in the name of the One-Child Policy. Under Wang's pastoral guidance, ERCC held open prayer meetings on sensitive historical dates frequently censored by the government, like June

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4. With Wang's leadership, ERCC even began a Christian school separate from the government-controlled education of China. Wang and ERCC have continually pushed the boundaries of speaking into China's CCP-dominated public square.

Central to Wang's message is the belief that the church ought to have a public presence in society because the gospel is a public *kerygma* for the world. He proclaims, "If Christ is my salvation, then what does Christ's salvation say to this society, this community, and the 'walls of hostility' that fill this world? We have something to say to this world, we have action to take regarding the walls of hostility in this world, we have something to do."<sup>6</sup> For Wang, the CCP represents the biblical image of Babylon—a kingdom that actively opposes God's kingdom and desires to supplant God's rule on earth with its own, providing an alternate "Mine!" to Christ's "every square inch."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in Wang's public theology, as part of its mission to China, the church forms a sort of alternate public to that of the CCP, and it is in the public realm where spiritual warfare is carried out.

### A Public Theology of the Cross

Such a bold stance in a place like China will inevitably lead to significant opposition. As one observer noted, "I had been wondering how long he could continue preaching before he would get in trouble. It wasn't really his sermons that made me wonder. Instead, it was that his church was a parallel realm outside the party's control."<sup>8</sup> The CCP decided to act decisively against Wang in December 2018, arresting him and over 100 of ERCC's members. A year later, Wang was sentenced to nine years in prison for inciting subversion of state power. While to some, it may seem that a public theology that leads to a prison cell might not be of much value, for Wang, persecution goes hand-in-hand with gospel proclamation and kingdom

4 For a fuller biographical introduction to Wang Yi, see Hannah Nation, *Introduction to Faithful Disobedience: Writings on Church and State from a Chinese House Church Movement*, ed. Hannah Nation and J. D. Tseng (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 8-10; Ma, *Religious Entrepreneurism*, 23-41.

5 "The Cross and the Cultural Mandate (Revelation 11:7-13) [Shizijia yu Wenhua Shiming]" presented at the 2017 China Ministry International Three Transformation Vision Conference, Hong Kong, 12 September 2017. <https://www.wangyilibrary.org/post/十字架与文化使命>.

6 Wang Yi, "The Gospel of Peace (Ephesians 2:14) [Heping de fuyin], presented at the Early Rain Covenant Church Sunday Worship, Chengdu, 6 May 2018. <https://www.wangyilibrary.org/post/和平的福音>.

7 Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

8 Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 60.

existence. Wang's call was not for the church to withdraw from the public square in the face of opposition but rather to take up a cross-shaped presence in the public square, recognizing that in many situations, even the best efforts at gospel reformation will be met with opposition and persecution. For the church living in the last age, Christ indeed reigns, but the kingdoms of the world oppose his reign. Her public mission does not change, but neither should much change be expected by opposing kingdoms. As a result, the church must suffer in the public square.<sup>9</sup>

It is perhaps this grasp of public theology that sets Wang Yi apart from public theologians in the Western world. Wang's public theology is one of bold kingdom

9 For the clearest presentation of his theology at this point, see Wang's three-sermon series "The Cross and the Cultural Mandate;" "Conservatism and the Cultural Mandate (Jude 18–25) [Baoshou Zhuyi yu Wenhua Shiming] presented at the 2017 China Ministry International Three Transformation Vision Conference, Hong Kong, 12 September 2017, <https://www.wangyilibrary.org/post/保守主义与文化使命>; and "Eschatology and the Cultural Mandate (Revelation 21:3–8) [Moshilun yu Wenhua Shiming]" presented at the 2017 China Ministry International Three Transformation Vision Conference Hong Kong, 12 September 2017. <https://www.wangyilibrary.org/post/末世论与文化使命>.

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proclamation, not only to the church but to all areas of society, with the expectation of suffering rather than victory. In this way, Wang presents a public theology that is perhaps better suited today for the global church, where a geographical and ethnic shift in majority Christianity increasingly places Christians in the crosshairs of hostile regimes. At the same time, Wang's public theology also gives a prophetic shape to public-theological discourse in a

Western church that experiences increasing hostility in what was once a relatively friendly public square. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ speaks both of persecution and of being salt and light in back-to-back sentences (Matt 5:11–13). Rather than escaping suffering, Wang has chosen to endure it for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel as truth for all people in every part of society and life.

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