

Article

Wang Yi and the 95 Theses of the Chinese Reformed Church

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Abstract: In August 2015, a group of pastors and elders from an urban house church in Chengdu, Sichuan, posted 95 theses online. This bold move, challenging the state and the Chinese churches has created controversy in China and abroad. The theses address a series of issues on sovereignty and authority with regard to God, the church and the government. This article considers briefly the historical and theological resemblances to Luther’s act, then examines three of the most controversial aspects of the document: its analysis of church–state relations, its rejection of the “sinicization” of Christianity, and its excoriation of the state-registered church. Of these three, the article focuses on church–state relations, since perspectives on the state church and sinicization stem from the same arguments. The article shows how the thinking of this Reformed church and its senior pastor Wang Yi draws on a particular reading of the bible, church tradition, and the role of conscience, and traces these to pastor Wang Yi’s earlier writings and his reading of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed thought.

Keywords: Wang Yi; house churches; Chinese theology; Calvinist; 95 theses

1. Introduction

In late August 2015, two pastors and five elders from the Early Rain Reformed Church¹ in Chengdu, Sichuan, signed a document entitled “Reaffirming our Stance on the House Churches: 95 theses,” an article that was accessed over thirty-eight thousand times in the first six months of its posting online [1]. The resemblance to Martin Luther’s act of five hundred years earlier is not incidental, and while the hubris might bemuse, the document can be seen as a milestone of house church belief, broadcasting its challenge to the state and to the state-registered Protestant church in China. Luther’s first posting of theses in mid-1517 had very little effect. It is too early to judge the significance of this new statement in church history, but the fiery, authoritative language, the standing of its lead author within the house church movement and the growing import of the Reformed (Calvinist) sector of the Chinese church, mean it would be impolitic to dismiss this as a stunt of mimicry.

Where Luther set out to dispute the nature of repentance and salvation, and question the Pope’s authority to issue indulgences to remit wrong, the Chengdu theses address a series of topics around sovereignty and authority as these pertain to God, the church, the government and the individual. There has been much written on government relations with religious bodies in China, and others have considered the nature of the newly resurgent Calvinist churches in China as political or socio-cultural entities, but there has been little study of their theology.² This article examines three of the most

¹ 秋雨之福归正教会: literally, Blessings of Autumn Rain Reformed Church (church materials use ‘Early Rain’ in English).

² For general studies, see e.g., Ashiwa and Wank [2]; for Protestant church–state relations, see e.g., Schak [3]. For urban house churches see Gerda Wielander’s study of Christian intellectuals which pays attention to Wang Yi [4]; on Calvinists, see Fällman [5]; Chow [6].

controversial aspects of the 2015 document: its analysis of church–state relations, its rejection of the “sinicization” of Christianity, and the excoriation of the state-registered church. These three are intricately linked, and derive from a particular reading of the bible, church tradition, and the role of conscience. The article focuses on church–state relations, showing how perspectives on the state church and sinicization stem from the same argument, and how “Reaffirming our Stance on the House Churches: 95 theses” develops out of pastor Wang Yi’s earlier writings and his reading of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed thought. We begin, however, with Luther.

2. From Wittenberg to West China

Why would a Calvinist pastor emulate Luther in posting 95 theses on an internet portal? Was it a clarion call to revolution, or something more akin to Luther’s set of propositions for debate? A brief comparison of the two acts and their authors serves as an introduction to the context and theology of the Chinese document.

The lead pastor of the Early Rain church, Wang Yi (b. 1973), is a prolific author and well-known spokesperson and commentator on the house churches in China, with strong connections to Chinese churches in North America. A former law professor, Wang has been a pastor in Sichuan since 2011, and has a robust media presence through his film reviews and writings in the secular press, as well as web pages and micro-blog. These latter host theological discussion threads as well as sermons and articles, and his published volumes (with mainland and Taiwanese presses, as well as self-published works beyond the purview of the censor) include an examination of constitutionalism, a study of the house church movement, essays on Christian faith and volumes of poetry, film reviews, edited interviews and sermons.³ The “new urban house-churches” that Wang represents are characterized by intellectual discourse and a mission for creating an open, “above ground” church that interacts with society. Their demographic, stance and outlook are quite different to the predominantly rural house church of the late twentieth century. Congregations are well-educated, young, and media-aware ([7], pp. 189–90). Conversion data speaks not of healing miracles as in rural church surveys of the 1980s and 1990s, but of a quest for meaning among young elites whose spiritual need is understood as a release from individualism and the vacuity of rampant consumerism. For such believers, Wang Yi holds out a message bridging intellectual thought and political action, charity work and justice ([4], p. 109).

Wang Yi has framed much of his theological thought over the past decade within Calvin’s (or Calvinist) categories of discussion, although the overlap with Lutheran ideas is evident, whether in the language of two kingdoms or an Augustinian anthropology. The questions why emulate Luther? And why now? Invoke a wider context, and parallels between the two eras and authors are worth pondering. Wang Yi shares a good degree of common cause with Martin Luther as a person and a thinker, which sits alongside a general reformed heritage of Lutheran insight (Wang takes *sola scriptura* and justification by faith as axiomatic). If the Holy Roman Empire of the sixteenth century experienced significant political and ecclesial tension, with contorted relations between imperial and local politics, church and culture, as well as serious questions over ecclesial funding, papal prerogatives and cultic revivals, the church in China is currently facing a similar array of tensions, fueling its charged thinking. The Holy Roman Empire and the limitations of papal authority—spiritual and regnant—are met, for Wang, in the party-state and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

Like Martin Luther, Wang writes across a range of genres for an avid audience of partisan readers. The writings of both Luther and Wang received immediate national and international scrutiny, and both are able popularizers, writing in an intelligible vernacular and utilizing popular media (whether wood

³ Wang Yi’s 18 published volumes include several major Christian studies, e.g., *On Constitutionalism: Turning Points in Views and Systems* (宪政主义: 观念与制度的转捩); *Kissing God* (与神亲嘴); *Revolution in the Depth of the Soul* (灵魂深处闹自由) and *Observations on China’s Urban House Churches* (观看中国城市家庭教会), the latter co-written with Liu Tongsu.

block images or magazines⁴) to disseminate views. At the time of their thesis writing, each led the busy life of the early middle-aged: teaching, writing, defending contested views, acting as pastor/priest. Both have scholarly and practical interests in history and the law: mining church history extensively and taking recourse in the law when challenged (canon law for Luther; the Chinese constitution for Wang). Just as Martin Luther's theology developed across lecture series, Wang's theology has evolved over time.

Many of Luther's ideas resonate in Wang's faith: from beliefs on church and state, to grace, to the need for discipline and obedience in churches. In his thinking on authority, Wang follows Luther in holding that no ruler enjoys power unless God wills it, and echoes the careful thought linking nation and church politics seen in the revolutionary manifestoes of 1520 [9]. Wang emulates Luther in prizing the keys to Heaven as the true treasure of the church (Luther thesis #60; Chengdu theses #55, 62, 67), and takes from Luther and his heirs an abhorrence towards any confusion of the Kingdom of God with the Kingdom of the World, and a firm belief in ecclesial things for the ecclesial. At the heart of Luther's writing was a critique of the church that was deeply pastoral in implication: what happens when the apostolic successors betray their evangelical vocation? ([10], p. 49)—this is a core question for Wang of the state church, and argued in equally passionate terms. *Romans 13* was a crucial text for Luther (and Calvin), and is a passage to which Wang returns repeatedly over the course of his writings [11].

In method, the two sets of theses differ. Luther's "95 Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" cohere around one central theme, which proceeds logically from step to step, creating in sum a sketch of the world at the time and pinpointing its wrongs and falsities. Luther's disputation is an invitation to argument, a gauntlet, and not a definitive statement of belief; it provoked an actual disputation of the gathered learned. By contrast, although the Early Rain church document invites response, it reads more credally, and Wang's trial has been virtual. There are significant differences too in approach: despite his attacks on the Roman Catholic church and the "far-fetched decrees" of the pontiff, Luther held that "by schism and contempt nothing can be mended" ([10], p. 32) and chose reform from within for as long as was possible, unlike Wang's position on the state-registered church.

It is reasonable to infer, however, that detailed comparison with Luther's theology was not the intention of the Chinese church leaders. It is the symbolism of Luther's life and action at a time of great turbulence in church life that inspires. Luther's steadfastness and self-belief, even to martyrdom, is the model being held up to the Chinese house church. In God's war, as Luther wrote, we need "beware of thinking Christ will achieve things in the earth quietly and softly, when He fought with his own blood" ([10], p. 81). Wang's rhetoric and life experience shadow Luther's: in believing adamantly that the fight is of God, in determination and stance for "truth," in willingness to face trial or prison, and in cleaving to the Word of God as the source for action and knowledge. The great symbolic and spiritual truth of protest against church and worldly powers is captured in the theses, whether protesting the degradation of temporal power in the ruling acts of the Chinese Party State or of spiritual power in the papacy. It is notable that the language of both men against detractors hardens over time, whether in Luther's lament questioning whether the Pope was the Antichrist ([12], p. 170) or in the Early Rain church's denunciation of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement as an "Antichrist movement" (#76). Luther brought significant change to the theology of the sector of the church catholic that chose to follow him: from a reduction in the number of sacraments to a new understanding on transubstantiation to the assertion that church Councils may err—but has Reformed house church theology in China lived up to the promise signified by its posting of 95 theses?

Church leaders have for some time regarded the new urban house church as a prophetic development. Wang Yi and Liu Tongsu see it as forming a new stage in house church history, taking over from the rural house church as the center of Chinese mission, in what they characterize as the Chinese church's own "post-apostolic" age, as the church moves from an era of personal experience

⁴ For multimedia propaganda on, and occasionally by, Luther, see ([8], pp. 1–36).

to one of theorization and forming structures ([7], p. 112). The strategic importance of the urban church is, moreover, national: God wants, Liu and Wang boldly argue, to renew the whole of mainstream Chinese culture through the urban house church ([7], p. 206). If the development of the urban house church thus represents a turning point in Chinese church history, does the publication of the 95 theses represent a new, bolder claim? This article suggests that the document both continues the prophetic understanding of the church (it is, after all, entitled “*Reaffirming our Stance on the house Churches: 95 Theses*”), but also expands it to a new horizon. The handing over of the baton to the urban churches represented a transfer of energy within the broader house church, while the 95 theses stake a claim regarding the entirety of the Chinese Protestant church. As the attack on the legitimacy of the “state” church and the exposing of the ills of the authorities recall Luther’s claims against the Roman church, and as the impassioned language, the strength of the assertions and the form of the theses evoke the symbol of Luther within that movement—and create a resonance between the figure of Luther and a leader such as Wang—it is difficult to read the document as anything other than a call to a new Reformation.

3. Parsing the Theses

In structure, “*Reaffirming our Stance on the House Churches: 95 theses*,” begins with initial clauses affirming God’s sovereignty as creator and authority over human beings and structures, acknowledging God as governor of the human conscience (#9) and the bible as the rule for human life and inerrant word of God (#12). The second section of theses (#18–31) presents a concise summation of the gospel message through the lens of covenant, law and redemption. The core of the gospel is not just the renewal of individual human relationships with God through the sacrificial offering of Christ, but also signifies “the coming of the Kingdom of God, and that all rulers, countries and peoples on earth have been commanded to heed this gospel—and that includes China” (#30).⁵ The following section (#32–39) addresses the question of the “Sinicization” of Christianity in China, adamantly refuting the possibility of any redemption via Chinese culture or love outside of Christ, and presenting an (Romans-heavy) analysis of the state of China’s relation to God and the limits of natural law. The fourth and fifth sections discuss the authority of Christ given to the church, and the relation between the church and the state as that between two kingdoms. The church submits to the authority of the “sword” of government, while defending its right to protect its own work of preaching the gospel. The nature of the kingdoms and the ideal of absolute separation between church and state comprise the greatest number of clauses (#45–72), while the final part of the document attacks the stance of the Three-Self Principles Movement and its “satanic” relationship with the government.

Two things are immediately apparent in reading the ninety-five theses: the recurrent emphasis on China and China’s place in God’s world, and the marked drawing on a framework of covenants and a language of depravity, which are usually identified as Calvinist in China.⁶ The coherence and indurate strength of the declarations derive from combining basic theological propositions taken from Calvin’s *Institutes* and the Westminster Confession—expressed in the document in terms of scriptural references—with extensive application to a mainland Chinese environment. A central theological datum for Wang, for example, is freedom of conscience, which is linked to the church’s freedom and so to church–state relations, to questions of what is legal and illegal, to who has ultimate authority over the conscience, and to the bible in its role as “the constitution of the church.” The premise often guides the argument: forcing a non-biblical standard onto a Christian, for example, is “to destroy humanity’s conscience and rationality, and to attack God’s rule over a person’s conscience” (#16).

⁵ My translations, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ On covenants, see #18–25; on depravity, see #24. As Fredrik Fällman has noted, there is a certain amount of term confusion in Chinese writings over “Calvinist” and “puritan” as well as misunderstandings of Lutheranism. The theses of Luther and Calvin on government were translated into Chinese in one volume in 2004, with the *Institutes* appearing in 2010. See ([5], pp. 155, 161–62).

3.1. Church and State

Church–state relations form the greater part of the theses. The introduction to “Reaffirming our Stance on the House Churches: 95 theses,” offers the theses as the basis for dialogue with the government, and invites comment and debate from believers in other churches who can affirm the document and who want to join the dialogue. The final clause, #95, notes that the statement was timed to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the imprisonment of house church leader Wang Mingdao and of the government attack on the “Wang Mingdao Anti-Revolutionary Clique” in 1955, and so to mark sixty years of oppression of the house church and to “defend the church before government and society.” The house church proclaims its willingness to meet with representatives of the state, whether local or national government, at any time and place they wish—but the dialogue is to be based on these theses and on the church’s theological standpoint. This is an acknowledgement of a certain stalemate in relations: the Chinese government has accepted that the “extra-legal” situation of the house churches cannot continue indefinitely, but expected announcements on their regularization have been continuously postponed, and indeed, the latest revisions to the Regulations on Religious Affairs seem to propel house churches back towards an illegal position.⁷ The church, meanwhile—and especially the rights’ defense faction of which Wang Yi is a lead proponent—wants to be open and legal, but not at the cost of suppressing the memory of its martyrs.

Authority *is* religious, argues the church document. All humans are governed by God (#5), and all authority comes from God (#6): the only legitimate reason we obey laws, is because they are instituted by God (#7). All have freedom of conscience (#10), but God is Lord over every conscience, and no human laws can exculpate from moral responsibility before God (#9): the choice for all is between obedience to God and enslavement to human authorities. The means that knowing God’s will is the bible, and once we jettison the bible and follow any external standards or authorities, our conscience remains neither moral nor secure (#14, which quotes Luther directly to this effect). To submit to non-biblical demands is to betray freedom, and no-one can demand this of another human. Clauses 20 and 21 encapsulate both the basis of resistance to the government and the perceived perfidy of the registered church:

21. This means that when anyone wants to become the ruler of our life, and wants to replace the will of God with their own will, or demands our unconditional submission, worship and praise—no matter whether our wife, our parents, or children, or the government or ruling party; no matter whether they come in tears or bearing a sword—this type of will, these demands, are all in essence religious in nature. These demands become the ‘god’ of a family, a company, or a state; they demand the loyalty and compliance of people’s consciences.

22. Morally, this type of will and these demands are evil. They are in opposition to God, and to humanity. Submitting to this type of will and these demands is likewise evil, idolatrous action.

Having established the basis for authority, and reiterating that Chinese society remains under the sovereignty of Christ whoever is in power, and that in spiritual reality it is Christ who governs and manages history and human hearts (#43), the authors set out their understanding of church–state relations. The church, the body of Christ endowed with the authority of Christ, is “a kingdom that no eye can see” (#44), and relations between church and state are therefore those of two “kingdoms/countries” (国度) and not those between a state and a subordinate religious authority, as the Chinese government might hold. In church history, claims the document somewhat magisterially,

⁷ Informed Beijing insiders had anticipated an announcement on house church normalization during the fifth plenum (of the 18th Communist Party Central Committee) in October 2015. The consultation period on proposed Revisions to the Regulations on Religious Affairs (宗教事务条例修订草案 送审稿) ended in September 2016, see e.g., [13].

these have been understood as the relations between the “City of God” and “City on Earth,” or between the spiritual and secular kingdoms, or the “already but not yet” of the eternal kingdom versus the “doomed to destruction” present world (#45). When the church in China is asked, therefore, whether its faith is antagonistic to the government, it responds by asserting that God’s kingdom has already come to China, and no sword may stand against it (#49); that while the church is obedient to authorities, it has never belonged to any given state or political power (#50, although this does not mean individuals may not oppose it, when their rights are abrogated); and that, just as the state has been given the authority of the “sabre” to manage social order; the church has been given the mission of the gospel, to witness to the truth (#53).

The critical balance of power between the sword of state and the “keys of the Kingdom of Heaven” that the church possesses, or the principal of “the separation of church and state” (#62), imposes responsibilities and restraints on each: for the church to oppose the sword would be to oppose God (#54), while the government cannot oppose God in refusing the church the right to preach. Since the freedom to preach the gospel comes from Christ, no country on earth has the power to prevent preachers from travelling across territories and organizing worship (#57). Moreover, just as the church cannot divest itself of this mission on the pretext of complying with extra-biblical or secular laws, nor can it place its glorious mission concerning the eternal soul of humanity under the control or examination of governments or other organizations: to do so would be to “sell God” (#58, 61, 72). While the things of God and the things of Caesar co-exist, God’s are internal (#65) and do not come under the sphere of Caesar (#64); no secular power can manage or judge conscience or faith (#68). It is Christ who has distinguished the two powers (#66), and the church cannot offer its power to transient government or economic powers, or unite its structures with those of the ruling powers, thereby confusing what is of God and of Caesar.

The absolute nature of the language on church and state is clear. The statement is also clear on its intended outcome: as soon as the state gives up its attempts to control church doctrine, personnel and evangelization work, the church will willingly comply with external administrative requirements in the name of public order, such as registration with the civil affairs department (#91).⁸ Elsewhere, Wang Yi has written at length on church and state, codifying the house church demands and expanding on the theological and legal ramifications of upholding the central tenets of freedom of conscience, the bible as the church’s constitution, and religion as a non-political entity. His own views are, if anything, more polemic than the 95 theses. However, Wang’s language suggests a subtle balance between gospel and constitution, and his strategy is to address these in tandem. Wang’s starting point is that the house church’s demands are the demands of the gospel—and ought to be respected within the scope of the Chinese Constitution and China’s position as a signatory to various international treaties. The church is not fighting for new rights, but “asking the state to acknowledge and respect the freedom we already have...” ([14], p. 367). Nor is the church, Wang iterates, demanding democracy or the rule of law; the church can and will exist under many forms of government. The only thing it demands, he notes echoing Barth, is the freedom to worship and to spread the gospel. Apart from the state’s role in guaranteeing the constitutional right to freedom of religion (a clause he suggests “exists in name only”), “the mission of the gospel has nothing to do with state power.” ([14], pp. 364, 362).

On the question of legality—and where human laws clash with divine ones—Wang’s rhetoric is frank, and combines an appeal to Christian conscience with a defense of the Christian moral and legal position. Over the last sixty years, he admits, the house church has “continuously violated the law” in worship, doctrine, theological education, children’s Sunday school, charitable work, and so forth ([14], p. 360). By “non-violent non-cooperation” the church has comprehensively violated China’s administrative regulations and laws: but the more pertinent question, he argues, is whether the state itself has violated them. The state, Wang insists, has “continuously trampled on its own constitution

⁸ As an independent religious organization, i.e., not through the TSPM.

and laws” in an “illegal, autocratic and barbarian fashion,” as he gives example after example to substantiate the claim of “mistaken application of the law” in authorities’ implementation of the various documents pertaining to religious activities from the 1950s through to the 2000s ([14], pp. 360, 365; [15]). In various essays, Wang (the former lawyer and constitutional historian) discusses the different types of regulation in force in China, and, like others, challenges the decision to channel religious “law” within administrative regulations, overseen by the party-state and not judicial bodies [16]. A growing literature by scholars and activists attests to contradictions in current legislation, with Christian believers among the most active in calling for the government to implement its own stated ideal of rule by law [17].⁹

The internal question for the church, suggests Wang, is whether it has violated that “higher, more worthy law” ([14], p. 360). Wang triangulates between Augustine, Luther and Calvin in his thinking on conscience, authority, and the nature of the church, with substantial reference to Samuel Rutherford, and figures such as the Scottish “puritan” Robert Murray McCheyne. In discussing three stages of conscience that Wang discerns in St Paul, for example (from natural, to religious, to gospel, based on Romans 1 and 2), Wang frequently cites Rutherford, one of the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly and author of *Lex, Rex* [18]. Rutherford is noted for his early reasoning on violent resistance to political sovereignty, constructing on the basis of *Romans 13* a conceptual apparatus able “to appropriate Paul’s exhortation to obedience in the service of a justification of resistance” ([19], p. 140). In tracing Wang’s mentors, we can see doctrinal, political and personal inspiration: Rutherford not only set out ideas of limited government and constitutionalism, but a divine mandate for Presbyterian forms of church government, and endured banishment and the burning of his books. While Rutherford was strongly opposed to the deification of conscience and its absolute liberty, we can find in his work the source for two central features of Wang’s thinking as embedded in the 95 theses: the conscience as “an understanding power” according to which we will have to give an account of ourselves, and the Word of God as “the rule of Conscience” ([20], pp. 4, 10).

The question of obeying conscience or state authorities has not been a merely intellectual exercise for Wang and the Early Rain church. Experiences such as the shutting down of the church in 2009 by local authorities, at first on “fire safety” grounds and subsequently as an “unregistered public organization,” have been the basis for a more developed theological and practical stance on church–state relations [21]. At the same time as being willing to suffer inconvenience/detention and call for a prayerful response, the church has defended itself vigorously to the local authorities, arguing that the use of the church name on law enforcement documents enabled it to be a legal plaintiff, that the enforcement procedure itself was illegal, and that the act denied church members their constitutional right of association. As Wang Yi notes, switching the law enforcement of churches from Public Security, to the Religious Affairs Bureau, to the Civil Affairs Bureau was potentially good for house churches—but denying them the right to register as civil organizations left no legal space for their existence ([15], p. 26). For Wang, the legal process brought two insights: that the question of freedom of belief was now a broader one of free assembly and the church needed to engage in consensus building with other intellectuals over such freedoms, and that the church needed to question administrative definitions of “church,” and wrest this back as a theological concept, “a group of people called out by God” ([22], p. 41).

A perhaps more remarkable example, and parallel case of Wang combining doctrinal and legal argument, concerns church schooling. In discussing the “Reformed School” instituted by his church and responding to the question of whether it was then legal to run a church school, Wang sets up a dichotomy. It is clear that at one level, setting up a school was an illegal act contravening Article 8 of the Education Law (based on Article 36 of the Constitution) which enshrines “the separation of education

⁹ “Comprehensively govern the country according to the law” was one of Xi Jinping’s new Four Comprehensives policy unveiled late 2014/early 2015 (also available as a cartoon rap from Xinhua, the official news agency).

and religion.” Under a system of “unified state and religion” (政教合一), with stipulation for education to be “nationalist, collective, internationalist and communist,” it is inevitable that Christianity will clash with the constitution [23]. While Wang argues for the absolute separation of church and state, he and his church elders will, he vows, single-mindedly oppose the separation of education and religion. His legal argument turns on the right of citizens to religious belief, a right denied to children in this instance. Here a more militant aspect comes into play: the church of the Lord has no other option, argues Wang, than to refuse to separate education and religion, as he advocates the recovery of Christian education and the rebuilding of church schools. The dialectic tension between the two kingdoms is evident: for the Christian, whose constitution is the bible, this is what “accords with the law.” Wang cites scriptural warrant, arguing (from Proverbs 22: 6 and 2 Chron. 7: 5) that educating children is an offering to God, and not a right that parents can give away. When the possibility of Christian education exists, to deny this is “testing God with children’s fate.” Having established the breach between state and church worldviews, Wang proceeds to outline a legal space between the bible and the Chinese constitution which provides for a medium-term reconciliation. Again, this works via recourse to international treaties, which, argues Wang, give parents priority in determining the type of education, and children the freedom to religious and moral education. As he also notes, China’s own Education Law has provision for religious schools (under State Council regulations), setting precedent for their acceptance as legitimate legal entities [23].¹⁰

In Wang’s thinking, a stance for freedom of conscience and for the achievement of constitutional rights is both a continuation of the work for the gospel of house church martyrs such as Wang Mingdao, and a gift to wider society in opening up civic space (this latter is why Alexander Chow wants to discuss Wang et al. as “public theologians” rather than “Calvinist” ones [6]). It is also the only way to understand the history of church–state relations in the second half of the twentieth century, since the oppression of the church, Wang argues, has been political not legal, and the church–state clash a matter of politics not law. From the church’s point of view, he notes, questions of worship, doctrine etc., are all matters of faith not politics: the government has politicized faith through its sixty years of persecution, turning the house church question into a political question ([14], pp. 362–63). This line of argument speaks to fears both in the house churches that the Reformed sector has been “politicizing” faith (which Wang defends robustly, pointing out that the premise for not registering through the TSPM is not wanting to politicize church), and fears in society more generally that the church is meddling in politics. (As Liu Tongsu notes, when the church is criticized for “playing politics,” this is usually because “politics” is widely regarded as meaning “power games,” rather than public affairs or public policies [24].) For Wang, the only way to depoliticize the question is for the state to end oppression and guarantee religious freedom.

If Wang insists on a transcendental source for secular values such as liberty or constitutionalism,¹¹ in writing for Christian audiences, he offers a nuanced version of freedom of conscience. In a letter to “Brothers and Sisters who have dedicated themselves to serve the Reformed Presbyterian Church,” he notes that the freedom the church has is “the freedom of conscience brought by the gospel,” and offers an anecdote to show the nature of this freedom and how it is linked to the church’s simultaneous existence in two states/kingdoms. An outsider had commented to Wang on how the Early Rain church lived in truth “as if you weren’t living under the CCP” [25]. Although he was not a believer, the speaker continued, he could see that the church was the freest group in all China, and that no other collective spread the faith or discussed Chinese society with such a lack of scruples. This,

¹⁰ Wang discusses the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, §18, 26; the International Treatise on Rights of Citizens and Rights of Governments, §18, and the UN (Rights of the Child, §14, and of Clause 82 of the Chinese Education Law, detailing the example of volunteer-run schools and why religious schools need not conflict with the primary regulation that “no one may use religion to conduct activities which impede the state education,” (Article 36 of Constitution).

¹¹ For a reading of Wang’s view on “Christianity and Democratization” and “Christianity and Liberalism,” and his use of “covenant” in understanding constitutional relations, see Wielander ([4], pp. 134–37).

for Wang, was important affirmation that living in fearless freedom really did equate to living outside of party-state control, embodying in community the truth that “the church is another kingdom/country.” The transformation that the cross brings is manifest, he explains, in “a counter-cultural culture, a counter-governmental government,” where money is for distribution and power is for serving others, and where members can speak in a bounded freedom. Church life is qualitatively different from life in the secular world, since the church is “the community of those who enter the Most Holy Place,” a sacred place of truth and protection.¹² In contrast to an older generation of so-called “cultural Christians” who have eschewed church community, the generation of the Reformed Church under its young leaders has put a premium on community and especially small-group life.

Wang’s views on church–state relations are internally consistent and he is widely viewed as a prophetic voice in the house church movement. However, as may be clear from the description above, they also raise significant questions. The 95 theses document arrogates to the church the right to define relations with the state, based on a biblical view and on a particular reading of theological history, leaving little room for dialogue. Wang might argue that the theses are based on the Westminster Confession [26], but on such key points as the balancing function of the civil magistrate in its judicial and deliberative functions—the authority of the magistrate regarding not just orderly worship but also doctrine and the right to call synods (see [27], Ch. XXX.3)—he eschews the original (and the view of Calvin) and follows the later revisions and exclusion clauses of various Presbyterian bodies.¹³ More critically for ecumenical relations and relations with the state, Wang’s views disregard other (non-Calvinist) theological constructs of church–state relations, and do not allow for the possibility of their legitimacy, or for development within Protestant churches on the matter.¹⁴ The tendency to use Calvinist theology as a proxy for Christian theology vis-à-vis the state is compounded by a tendency to speak for the entire house church, and to regard Reformed doctrine as unquestionably normative for this disparate body, a move problematic both for the house churches and for the post-denominational emphasis of the (state) church nationally.¹⁵

While the church proclaims its Calvinist heritage, the theological basis and scope of Wang’s pronouncements merit further discussion. Certain elements are explicit: a Calvinist political community under the lordship of Christ, with both state and church accountable to God; the church as a restored community; a neo-Calvinist belief in the limited role of government and civil protection for religious freedom; a Lutheran call to take up a (metaphorical) sword when the state transgresses into the spiritual realm. Other elements are less clear, such as the anticipated relation of the two kingdoms to the Kingdom of God, as well as to each other—along the lines of a Kuyperian refining of spheres of sovereignty and the function of government itself. Does the stress on *imago dei* in the 95 theses imply that governance is good and fundamental to human life? A more positive Calvinist view of the role of the state in God’s overall economy and in transforming society seems tempered by the experience of the Chinese state, but it is unclear how this experience filters back into doctrinal statements. Under-theorized questions include how life outside of the church, that part under state authority, is connected to God (especially given that the Communist view of all life under its purview parallels the church one), and how the church conceptualizes participation in secular life as individuals and communities, in light of Wang’s “Christian first, citizen second” formula. The document is silent on such questions as the dangers inhering in elevating individual conscience above legal systems

¹² Wang discusses the limited nature of “freedom of speech” in the secular world, and makes clear the protective discipline policies of his church, that do not allow e.g., criticism of church workers on QQ or revealing dissenting views after a vote.

¹³ For historical discussion of the difficulty of reconciling Christ’s headship of the church with the magistrate’s function see ([18], pp. 244, 247).

¹⁴ On the current variation, see e.g., ‘Introduction’ and essays in [28]; on polarized debates in the US and changes in the Lutheran church’s position, see e.g., ([29], pp. 52 et passim).

¹⁵ For example, in quoting John Wesley on the importance of group piety, Wang notes of Wesley “we don’t much agree with his theology,” suggesting the perceived need for denominational/theological purity in thinkers cited.

(thesis #10)—whilst holding to equal separate spheres—and of the consequences in a country where legislation gives primacy to the state over individual autonomy ([5], p. 158).

One could argue that the positive engagement with society, especially over questions of public or civil space, by Wang and the rights-proclaiming Chinese churches, is actually aimed at enabling a separate space, a Lutheran-type sphere for the church to be church, in a model more akin to the older house-church version of separation than its Calvinist-leaning leaders might suppose. Despite the much publicized work of select Christian lawyers and rights activists, the social reform, or kingdom building element of house church work is still relatively inchoate—although it may be premature to expect answers and action when some house churches are still fighting for the basic right to exist.

3.2. *The Sinicization of Christianity and Denunciation of the TSPM*

If explaining a house church ecclesiology forms a major concern of “Reaffirming our Stance on the House Churches: 95 theses,” the church’s position on two other significant issues derives naturally from the premises and arguments above. The nature of “Chinese Christianity” has been contested since the earliest days of the Protestant mission, and has been a focal question for two recent constituencies, the academic study of Christianity in China, often termed Sino-Christian theology, and theologians in state-approved seminaries, particularly within the “Theological Reconstruction” movement. The second issue, a trenchant critique of the role the state church has taken vis-à-vis the authorities, is already implicit in the account of church and state. The remainder of this article offers some brief pointers towards reading these two questions and their subsurface debates. The house church’s stance in the 95 theses on both issues is unequivocal: anyone advocating, for example, the “sinicization” of Christianity is “denying Christ” and “will fall under God’s righteous curse and judgement” (#36).

The list denoting what “sinicization” might mean appears comprehensive:

37. This kind of advocacy or demand for a “sinicization of Christianity” includes claims for the worship of the unique God revealed in Scripture within traditional Chinese culture and religion, or for a means of saving grace akin to or identical with that of the atonement of Jesus Christ; advocating that in traditional Chinese culture or religion there is revelation of salvation outside of the unique God of the bible; advocating that the basic doctrines of the church catholic must, or need, be adapted to Chinese cultural traditions or contemporary society or political system; advocating getting rid of the historic Christ for some “cosmic Christ” theory and holding that Chinese traditions contain the way of salvation of Christ; diluting or denying the substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross by means of “justification by love” or other such tenets consonant with traditional Chinese moral thinking.

38. The church must oppose the “sinicization of Christianity,” that is, oppose the twisting of the gospel by culture, or the use of politics to bind faith, or using Chinese traditions that are not faithful to God to sever from the traditions of the universal church that are faithful to God.

The referents are unstated, but it is possible to tease out three types of thinking implicated in the critique in #37. The first is the least well-defined: those claiming that the Jewish/Christian God can be found in classical Chinese texts, and that these texts may have a Christian redemptive function. Debates over whether the “Shangdi” of early canonical texts is the same God as referred to in Hebrew and Christian scriptures have occupied Protestant scholars since the nineteenth century, and provided cause for much acrimonious debate and division, but there are very few in the church who have advocated an alternative route to salvation from these, especially in the present, and most

contemporary work on Christian–Confucian etc., dialogue is academic rather than confessional.¹⁶ The timeline gives a clue to the grounds for the objection: thesis #32 explains that God used Chinese culture and wisdom *in the past* to reveal God to China, but the new covenant of Christ (#40) supersedes any earlier stages of revelation through nature or conscience.

The second set of those “twisting the gospel through culture” seems potentially to encompass all engaged in any form of indigenization or in culturization work adapting doctrine to Chinese culture or society—that is, much of the history of Chinese Christian theology—and appears predicated on belief in a supra-cultural gospel, separated from the linguistic forms and cultural meanings through which it is transmitted. This may be an over-reading of what is intended in the Early Rain document (indigenization is only sometimes a matter of transmuting core doctrines), but the text might be read as an undifferentiated attack on everything from the work of liberal, church theologians in the *bensehua* 本色化 or *bentuhua* 本土化 (“indigenization”) movements of the early twentieth century through to the writings of a thinker such as He Guanghu in the 2000s arguing that Christianity should start out from social reality. Reference to the cosmic Christ and “justification by love” are more straightforward to delineate: both address the theology of the former head of the TSPM, Bishop Ding Guangxun. Ding’s work drawing on Teilhard de Chardin is well-known, as is his foregrounding of a God of love—alongside a widespread (mis)belief that Ding denied the core Protestant doctrine of justification by faith (see e.g., [31], p. 7).

A discussion of contextualization in Chinese Christianity is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is a little ironic that a church with such a strong denominational and transplanted historical context shaping the parameters of its theology should be so readily dismissive of others’ attempts to engage their cultural setting. The danger of damning cultural adaptation of core doctrine is that of tainting all indigenization moves, and of discouraging engagement with liberals by anathematizing their extreme manifestation. Zhao Zichen, revered theologian and, presumably, epitome of those targeted, wrote in 1947, “to the Chinese, God speaks as if He were a Chinese,” and yet for all, “the Word goes out over against their particular existing environments” ([32], p. 482). This same Zhao who saw in Confucius “a clear revelation of God, though only in certain particulars” and the indigenous church as “one which conserves and unified all truths contained in the Christian religion and in China’s ancient civilization,” also did his utmost to evangelize China and to “follow Jesus” personally, as did many of the academic theologians of the day [33,34]. The potential for misrepresentation of “Sinicizing” attempts among liberal theologians is clear, but the thesis gives no context: one of the most active periods of conceptualizing a “Chinese church,” for example, was the 1920s, in the midst of national crisis about what it meant to be Chinese, when not to engage with the question would have been negligent. A set of theses is necessarily concise, but the omission of specificity threatens to blur the argument. Ding Guangxun did not deny justification by faith, arguing only that Christians erred when they paid attention to this to the exclusion of works, yet the tendency to repeat this statement unexamined has extended well beyond Chinese evangelical scholarship.¹⁷ In place of “sinicization,” house church voices have called for the “evangelization of China, the kingdomization of the church, the Christianization of culture” (中国福音化, 教会国度化, 文化基督化). It remains to be seen how the “Christianization” of Chinese culture may proceed without the evisceration of the Chinese or imposition of foreign cultural forms. A notable trait among urban house church writers is to acknowledge United States church partners for material help, training, and as a dialogue partner—and yet to seem to see this as a neutral, culture-free Christianity.

¹⁶ The locus classicus is Legge [30]. Elsewhere, Wang has inveighed against comparative studies, of Christ and Confucianism etc.

¹⁷ In his otherwise informative article on church-state relations, for example, David Schack writes of how Ding “revised Protestant theology, stripping it of supernatural content and notion of salvation by faith and converting it to morality and ethics” [3].

While the anti-sinicization theses are aimed at a spectrum of academics and theologians and a range of beliefs on Christ and culture, the attack on the state church (#73–#95) is directed at one facet: its betrayal of the keys of Heaven entrusted to it, through collusion with the ruling authorities. There is a clear link between the extremely rigid separation of spheres of church and state described above and the rejection in totality of the TSPM, which relates back to the church–state split of the 1950s (alluded to in #95) and the sense that the church “sold out” on the faith in the decisions made. The house church, the document states, will not accept any censorship or monitoring by the government, any training or registration or interference in appointments, any financial controls or limitation on worship (place, age of participants, content); any slander against or persecution of missionaries in China; any church officers who also work for the government or in political parties; any notion of “religious affairs” as part of government business (#74, 86, 87). To do so betrays the authority entrusted to the church and “joins in the oppression of the true church” (#75); it is the sign of a corrupt and idolatrous church, a whore not the bride of Christ (#83), a “false church” that has given itself over to political power (#79), a “scheme of Satan” that denies the kingdom of Christ is higher than nations on earth (#76). The house church must “fight to death” for the invisible keys to the kingdom and power of the gospel (#82), and uphold its three core principles of the (inerrant) Bible as its guide; Christ as the only head of the church, and the separation of church and state, with the church submitting to government power in the sphere of governance and holding to freedom of conscience in matters spiritual (#78).

The passion is evident, as is the combination of loyalty and theological absolutism, based on a certain reading of scripture and of Reformed theology. Making “two kingdoms” theology and the separation of church and state the central dogma of faith has had a clear concomitant effect on the scope and direction of theological debate for the Early Rain church. While one can understand why the current assault of government advice to registered pastors as to what local and national issues merit attention, and indeed what they might like to focus on in their preaching, might repel pastors such as Wang Yi, such language—which echoes nothing so much as the tone of the Vatican on communists in the 1950s—makes reconciliation between the registered and unregistered churches almost impossible to conceive. It also represents a partial reading of both Chinese church history and Reformed tradition, as suggested above. On the debates of the 1950s, others within the house church movement have taken a more conciliatory approach regarding the decisions that the fledging unified church took to maintain its existence, including Wang Yi’s co-author Liu Tongsu; a careful re-reading of the debates and of the historical situation of the Chinese church in the Republic and the early years of the PRC is imperative to any progress on this question ([35], p. 207). Wang Yi’s particular reading of Calvinist tradition on church autonomy (versus independence) and his heavy dependence on American interpretations and experience over, say, European modes of church–state relations, have channeled the course of debate, a debate which will continue to have ramifications within the house church movement and nationally.

4. Conclusions

South African theologian Denise Ackermann notes that “We say God is love; we do not often say that God is freedom,” and recounts how the neo-Calvinism that dominated Reformed South African theology almost deterred her from finding the “stunning depth” in Calvin’s writing on freedom, that freedom which enables consciences to rise above the law and resist tyranny, whose embrace permits true service of others ([36], pp. 150–55). In contrast, freedom of conscience is a cardinal tenet of Wang Yi’s theology (whereas God as love is more problematic because of the association of that theme with TSPM theologies). It is easy to see why a Chinese lawyer and constitutional expert would be drawn to Calvinist thought and to the central question of church–state relations. The exponential growth in academic interest in Calvinism in China attests to broader interest in such thought ([5], pp. 156–57),¹⁸ while Wang Yi himself invested considerable time in translating into Chinese Douglas F.

¹⁸ Over a thousand relevant articles were published in China in 2009–2010.

Kelly's volume *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* [37]. If anything, one might argue that Wang Yi has spent too much time reading sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theology, seen in hyperbolic language and in the revivifying of debates in contemporary China soaked in the 1584 Black Acts, monarchical tyranny and National Covenant.

We can hold in tension two conclusions. The first is the courageous, and timely stance on the gospel and on such questions as the rule of law and role of a constitution that the Early Rain church document represents. The cost to the house church of its beliefs has been very great over the last sixty years, and the sacrifice has given the church a strong moral voice in debate, a voice and confidence that it is now deploying to good effect in the interests of other citizens. Given China's contradictory relations with its judiciary and constitution as well as with international legal bodies, and set against a background of the state strengthening its control over churches, it is both timely and dangerous to dissect the constitution, or to write openly of teaching school children about the Tiananmen massacre. Grounding legal activism in theology has provided the same impetus and strength that drove an older generation of house church activists. In an era when the Chinese government is dealing with global aspirations to theocracy on its north-west borders, a propulsion to absolute division between state and religion also provides much food for political thought.

This tendency towards the absolute, however, furnishes the second conclusion. Wang Yi and the Early Rain church 95 theses have avoided much of the more nationalistic aspects of Calvinist thought and of other sectors of the Chinese church in their analysis of church–state relations, and two kingdoms theology may contribute to a way beyond recent advocacy of Chinese exceptionalism, or insoluble debate on nationalism versus patriotism. The zealous and uncompromising interpretation of two kingdoms theology, however, brings its own problems. One is a potential inflexibility in dealing with the state, both at a practical level (and so potentially engendering unnecessary oppression or control, limiting the reach of church work¹⁹) and also metaphysically, in inhibiting theological thinking on how to integrate life in the civil and church worlds—even under an oppressive, atheist regime, or on how to serve vocationally in the civic sphere, or even be a Christian leader and politician. Another is in representing Christianity truthfully, to Christians and to the state. As suggested above, the tendency to speak for all of the “house church” has been compounded by narrow views of Christian history and biblical mandate, especially on the contentious question of church–state relations. While Wang Yi has championed thinkers such as the Scottish reformers, he has not always followed through the natural inference: in the Scottish case, that kirk–state relations have been much more complex and interrelated than allowed for in his parsing, or that various European Presbyterian churches have followed very different trajectories than the US model and its outworking in church and society—or even that Luther himself entertained a much greater acceptance of state authority over church affairs than Wang's absolutist line.

Given the argument that Wang Yi (and the Early Rain church) have chosen to make, based strongly on a separation of spheres and less on the problematic of working with an ungodly or communist state per se, the existence of alternative, godly, modes of church–state relations elsewhere in the Christian world undermines the cause of antagonism to the state-registered church. The presentation of the history of the Chinese church is stark in the theses, with little consideration of what freedom and independence meant to the forerunners of the state church structurally and theologically—i.e., as independence from imperialism and colonial control—or why social gospel ideals may have legitimately aligned with communist ones in the very early years of the PRC. Vituperative attacks on the state church condemn many of the ordinary faithful, something Luther was more careful to avoid—but they may yet herald a full-blown Reformation in the Chinese church.

¹⁹ The precedent for this flexibility might be in the Roman Catholic experience of the State relaxing regulations and allowing some non-CCPA members to act as priests, see ([38], p. 40).

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

TSPM	Three-Self Patriotic Movement.
CCP	Chinese Communist Party.
PRC	People's Republic of China.

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