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Welcoming the Exposure
of the Counter Revolutionary. . .
A Chinese Theologian Coming to Terms with the Past

MONIKA GAENSSBAUER

Abstract

The starting point for this contribution is the hypothesis of the non-existence of the years from 1955 to 1976 in the history of the Chinese Church in mainland China. The author first looks at the political developments in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the developments of the Chinese Church in the 1950s. The second part concerns the historical reappraisal of the 1950s in China so far. The main focus of the third section is the analysis of a chain letter obtained by the Chinese theologian Wang Weifan 汪維藩, which in the opinion of the author offers a third approach to the historical reappraisal of the 1950s. Finally the author tries to put Wang Weifan's points of view in the context of the Protestant Church in mainland China.

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1. NON-EXISTENCE OF THE YEARS FROM 1955 TO 1976 IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHINESE CHURCH

In generally rare contributions to Chinese church history in mainland China about the period after 1949, there are detailed descriptions of the first years after the founding of the PRC.¹ This was the time when all foreign missionaries were expelled and a thorough restructuring of the Chinese Church took place under the rule of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Most Chinese Christians and scholars of religious studies make no mention of the time from around 1955 to 1976 and the massive problems experienced by religious believers during those times.² Usually not more than one or two sentences are given over to characterising these years, in as far as these times are mentioned at all in summaries or surveys. In 1993, Wang Weifan and Ji Fengwen 季鳳文 admitted that in the time from the late 1950s to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) “Left-wing” tendencies had increased, which meant “that the great plans for the expansion of the church had unfortunately dissolved into thin air.”³ Zhuo Xinping 卓新平, a scholar of religious studies, states simply that after 1957 the attitude towards religion changed and from 1957 to 1976 the situation for religious life deteriorated dramatically.⁴ However, in their contributions to church history

¹ “In general Chinese archives have been more forthcoming with documents and reports dating from the early 1950s than from later periods.” See Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowitz, “The Early Years of the People’s Republic of China,” in *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People’s Republic of China*, ed. Brown and Pickowitz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3–18, 6. “Many such works are dedicated to celebrating the ‘golden age’ following ‘liberation.’” Ibid.

² See *pars pro toto*: Ying Gao, “Chinas Kirche: Geschichte und Gegenwart” [The Chinese Church: Past and Present], in *Christentum im Reich der Mitte: Aktuelle Thesen und Texte aus China* [Christianity in China: Current Theories and Texts from China], ed. Monika Gänßbauer (Hamburg: Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland, 1998), 22–29, 24. Gao’s text is a published and translated version of a paper given at the University of Hamburg on August 25, 1997.

³ Wang Weifan and Ji Fengwen, “Forty Years of Christianity,” *Chinese Theological Review* 8 (1993): 44–62, 54f.

⁴ Zhuo Xinping, “Das Religionsverständnis im heutigen China” [The Understanding of Religion in Contemporary China], in *Christsein in China: Chinesische Stimmen aus Kirche und Forschung* [Christianity in China: Chinese Voices from the Church and Research], ed. Monika Gänßbauer (Brekum: EMW, 2000), 82–97, 86. Zhuo’s text is a published version of his presentation in German at the University of Hamburg on December 13, 1999.

Chinese authors describe in great detail the period after the Cultural Revolution, when the existence of religion was permitted again. This phenomenon is for example apparent in a collection of texts by the Chinese bishop and former church leader K. H. Ting (丁光訓 Ding Guangxun).⁵ Only two of the texts in the collection are from the period between 1955 and 1961. All the other texts are from the time before or after this period, although Ting published 20 essays in the 1950s.⁶

A text of the theologian Zhang Xianyong 張賢勇 forms an exception to the previously mentioned phenomenon, but it was published outside China.⁷ Zhang states as a fact that Christianity—besides Taoism and folk-religious organisations—was clearly the main target of attacks in the political turmoil of the 1950s. In the 1950s attempts were often made to get people to give up their faith, either by trying to convince them or by threatening them. According to Zhang being free from religion in those days meant something like an illness being cured. Zhang Xianyong also looks critically at the methods of self-criticism. What seems most diabolical to him in retrospect is the fact that even the most upright self-criticisms later fell victim to manipulation. Concerning the practice of self-criticism used in the Soviet Union and China, Berthold Unfried asserts that today this practice appears to us as a curious “form of making oneself a subject of discussion by describing one’s faults, mistakes and shortcomings.”⁸ The main idea of self-criticism was to demonstrate an attitude of humility towards the Communist Party. The position of the individual was always that of a guilty person.

⁵ Janice Wickeri, ed., *Love Never Ends: Papers by K. H. Ting* (Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2000).

⁶ See Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 346.

⁷ Zhang Xianyong, “Die zwei Gesichter des Janus” [The Two Faces of Janus], in Gänßbauer, *Christentum im Reich der Mitte*, 87–99. The text was presented in German in this publication.

⁸ Berthold Unfried, “*Ich bekenne:*” *Katholische Beichte und sowjetische Selbstkritik* [I Confess: Catholic Confession and Soviet Self-criticism] (Frankfurt / Main: Campus, 2006), 149.

2. POLITICAL AND CHURCH DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 1950S

In 1949 Mao Zedong (毛澤東 Mao Tse-tung) proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China and by the year 1950 a land reform movement took place in China. Immediately after the founding of the PRC the CPC began to instigate "mass campaigns." With such campaigns the political elite mobilised the population, according to Siegfried Klaschka, in order to unleash a broad initiative to fight against certain political tendencies or to safeguard their own rule.⁹ Thoralf Klein describes the basic elements of the campaigns in the PRC in this way: They usually began with a thorough indoctrination of the population by party leaders and police. The active inclusion of the "masses" took the form of reading and discussing central party documents in large groups and at the heart of many political campaigns were the accusation meetings.¹⁰ According to Klaus Mühlhahn, public outbreaks of violence were part of life in China in the 1950s.¹¹

With the "Three-Anti-Movement" from 1951 to 1953 the Chinese party-state wanted to fight against corruption, lavishness, and bureaucracy. However the campaign was also turned against teachers, who were accused of being too close to Western ideas. A young Christian woman criticised her father:

In the past I recognized you as a . . . teacher, wise and able . . . [But] . . . I awakened to see that . . . you are truly a Christian without political feeling for the Communist Party. We all thank the

⁹ Siegfried Klaschka, "Die politische Geschichte im 20 Jahrhundert" [Political History in the Twentieth Century], in *Länderbericht China: Geschichte, Politik, Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft* [Country Report China: History, Politics, Economy, Society], ed. Doris Fischer and Michael Lackner (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2007), 129–155, 142.

¹⁰ Thoralf Klein, *Geschichte Chinas: Von 1800 bis zur Gegenwart* [Chinese History: From 1800 to the Present] (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007), 197f.

¹¹ Klaus Mühlhahn, "Repaying Blood Debt: State Violence and Mass Crimes During the 1950s in China," in Mechthild Leutner, ed., *Rethinking China in the 1950s*, vol. 31 of *Berliner China-Hefte* (Berlin: Lit, 2008): 35–48, 35.

Communist Party for bringing us these days of great glory and blessing.¹²

Tu Yuqing 涂羽卿, later the General Secretary of the National YMCA of China, also came under pressure. He was accused of entertaining relations with “imperialists.” Tu had lived in the U.S.A. from 1914 to 1919. In 1951, Y. T. Wu (吳耀宗 Wu Yaozong), one of the most influential church leaders after 1949, even considered such denunciation biblically justified: “To denounce is in line with the teaching of Jesus. He . . . attacked evil through action, just as he used a whip to chase the merchants away from God’s temple.”¹³

In 1993 the church representatives Wang Weifan and Ji Fengwen still considered it an achievement of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement between 1950 and 1954 to have saved “many pastors and Christian young people, who had been deeply poisoned by imperialism” and to have helped them “to become positive elements.”¹⁴

The “struggle against imperialism” was also an important part of party propaganda during the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, Socialist Unity Party of Germany) dictatorship. According to Ulrich Mählert, in a political system of co-ordinates, in which the general line was always “right” and its success also “officially” predetermined, explanations for political and economic difficulties and setbacks inherent in the system were “not permitted.” There were only two permitted reasons for deficits in real socialist political systems: external influence of the enemy and the incapability of cadres to reliably implement the right political line.¹⁵

The “Campaign against Counter-Revolutionaries” introduced in China in 1950 cast a dark shadow over the churches for many years. Contacts with foreigners constituted “counter-revolutionary facts con-

¹² See Wallace C. Merwin and Francis P. Jones, ed., *Documents of the Three-Self-Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in Communist China* (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1963), 71f.

¹³ Cited in Ng Lee-ming 吳利明, “A Study of Y. T. Wu,” *Ching Feng* 1 (1972): 5–54, 50f.

¹⁴ Wang and Ji, “Forty Years of Christianity,” 51.

¹⁵ Ulrich Mählert, “Die Partei hat immer recht! Parteisäuberungen als Kaderpolitik in der SED” [The Party is Always Right! Cleansing as a Party Cadre Policy in the SED], in *Terror: Stalinistische Parteisäuberungen, 1936–1953* [Terror: Stalinistic Party Purges, 1936–1953], ed. Ulrich Mählert and Hermann Weber (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998), 351–457.

stituting an offence.”¹⁶ A report by Y. T. Wu on the development of the Church in the years from 1954 to 1956 says:

During the national campaign to root out counter-revolutionaries, which took place in the latter part of 1955 and the early months of 1956, some counter-revolutionaries hidden within the church were uncovered. These men under the cloak of religion had formed a reactionary imperialist clique which acted as spies.¹⁷

The massive campaigns resulted in large parts of the population being so intimidated that they resigned and withdrew from social life. However in order to win over the educated people in the country to work to build up the People’s Republic, the Chinese leadership proclaimed the following slogan in Spring 1957: “Let one hundred flowers bloom, let one hundred schools contend!” The slogan indicated that from then on more freedom of opinion should be allowed. However soon the criticism expressed against the leadership of the party-state actually went too far. In June 1957 an “anti-rightist campaign” was launched, in which all those who had expressed too much open criticism were punished. In the course of repressions by 1958 around 400 intellectuals had been put to death as “enemies of socialism” and more than half a million people were deported to labour camps.¹⁸ The 1950s with their chain of mass campaigns and persecution can certainly be classified as an “extreme situation.”¹⁹

In 1950 leading personalities of the Chinese Church requested an audience with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai (周恩來 Chou En-lai) in order to talk to him about the difficulties of the Church. Their aim was to achieve an agreement whereby the churches would be better protected by the government.²⁰ But in the end the group gave up their original

¹⁶ Oskar Weggel, *Geschichte Chinas im 20. Jahrhundert* [History of China in the Twentieth Century] (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1989), 160.

¹⁷ Y. T. Wu, “Report on the China Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement from July 1954 to March 1956,” in Merwin and Jones, *Documents of the Three-Self Movement*, 121–33, 123.

¹⁸ See Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, *Das neue China: Von den Opiumkriegen bis heute* [The New China: From the Opium Wars to the Present] (München: C. H. Beck, 1999), 80.

¹⁹ For a definition of the term “extreme situation” see Bruno Bettelheim, *Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations* (New York: Irvington Pub, 1991).

²⁰ Liu Liangmo 劉良模, “Huainian aiguo aijiao de Wu xiansheng” 懷念愛國愛教的吳先生 [In Memory of Wu Yaozong Who Was a Patriot and Who Loved His Church], *Tian-feng* 天風 [Heavenly Wind] 10 (1982): 22–24, 23.

intention and began in its place to work on a “Christian Manifesto.” The development of the manifesto as a United Front process was accompanied by regular consultations with party representatives.²¹ In the end a political declaration was produced, which settled the score with imperialism and declared that the Church supported the political positions of the “New China.” All Christians in the country were called upon to sign the manifesto to show their agreement.²² The adoption of the manifesto marked the beginning of the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement (*Zhongguo Jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong*), a political mass movement of Chinese Protestants. In the end around 417,000 Christians signed the paper. However those who were not prepared to sign at that time came under enormous pressure and were even accused of being counter-revolutionaries.²³

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, China showed solidarity with North Korea. From December onwards the Chinese government froze the support funds sent by Western mission societies for the Chinese churches. Finally all foreign missionaries were expelled from the country. In 1995 Bishop K. H. Ting played down what happened in those days and described it laconically:

We adjusted our view of Christians overseas . . . When you mentioned a missionary in the 1950s and 60s, you had to add “imperialist” before the name. We were really a bit self-satisfied then.²⁴

In 1954 the first National Conference of the Protestant Churches was held in Beijing and a Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was appointed with the aim, “to unite Christians throughout

²¹ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 129.

²² Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, “Aiguo aijiao, tongxin maixiang xin shiji: Zhongguo Jidujiao Sanzi Aiguo Yundong wushi nian de zongjie” 愛國愛教·同心邁向新世紀——中國基督教三自愛國運動五十年的總結 [Patriotism and Love for the Church: Entering Together Upon a New Century on Fifty Years of Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement], *Tianfeng* 10 (2000): 10–16, 11.

²³ Zhang, “Die zwei Gesichter des Janus,” 92f.

²⁴ K. H. Ting, “A Look Back at the Way We Have Come,” in Wickeri, *Love Never Ends*, 491–500, 492.

the country . . . to take an active role in resistance to imperialism and to support patriotism.”²⁵

For 1956 Duan Qi 段琦, a scholar of religious studies, speaks of the beginning of a “theological mass movement” in the Chinese Protestant Church. According to Duan it was basically a question of the compatibility of Christianity and Socialist society.²⁶ In 1990 Wang Weifan also characterised the time from 1956 onwards as a phase of “theological re-orientation involving the masses . . . but it was cut short by the political movements of the late 1950s.”²⁷ This is the only sentence in which Wang mentioned the campaigns of the late 1950s at that time. In 1993 however he declared the theological debate from 1956 onwards to have been a success. It had among other things led to the recognition that truth, goodness, and beauty also existed outside Christianity—this was “the reason why a new nation was able to be born with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.”²⁸

In the 1950s the number of Christians went down rapidly. Philip Wickeri confirms that in the 1950s it was not easy for the Chinese Church to recruit qualified young theologians. It was necessary to get the permission of the local government or the labour unit before starting to study theology and teachers, soldiers, and government staff members were forbidden to study theology anyway. In the China of the 1950s the churches were maligned as “reactionary.” Even in the “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” in those days some people maintained that in the “New China” there was no need for either theology or churches.²⁹

In Wu’s report in 1956 he states that the patriotism of Chinese Christians had increased further in the past few years. China was making breathtaking progress in building socialism according to Wu. He declared: “We Christians have complete freedom of religious belief

²⁵ “Zhongguo Jidujiao quanguo huiyi gao quanguo tongdao shu” 中國基督教全國會議告全國同道書 [Message of the National Conference of the Chinese Christianity to All Coworkers], *Tianfeng* 425–427 (Sept 1954): 469.

²⁶ Duan Qi, “Dangdai Zhongguo Jidujiao gaikuang ji suo mianlin de wenti” 當代中國基督教概況及所面臨的問題 [The Circumstances of Contemporary Chinese Christianity and the Problems It Confronted With], *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 [Studies in World Religions] 3 (2003): 63–69, 64.

²⁷ Wang Weifan: “The Pattern and Pilgrimage of Chinese Theology,” *Chinese Theological Review* (1990): 30–54, 33.

²⁸ Wang and Ji, “Forty Years of Christianity,” 53.

²⁹ Philip L. Wickeri, “Theological Reorientation in Chinese Protestantism, 1949–1984 (Part 2),” *Ching Feng* 28 (1985): 105–29, 119.

under a government directed by the Communist Party.”³⁰ In a pastoral letter in 1956 the theologian Ting and others also painted a sugar-coated picture of “New China”: day by day the mother country presented herself in a more favourable light. Negative phenomena—such as homeless children, hungry farmers, or unemployed workers—no longer existed, wrote Ting.³¹

After the commencement of the “Hundred Flower Campaign” two remarkable texts written by church representatives were published in the church magazine *Tianfeng* (Heavenly Wind), which—in contrast to the stereotypical proclamations of praise and loyalty to the CPC often produced previously—identified political irregularities and the difficulties for the Church in the “new society.” The first text³² revealed quite openly the problems confronting the churches in the late 1950s. Many Christians faced discrimination in their workplaces as “comrades” were prejudiced against Christians. Many party representatives considered religious faith per se to be “counterrevolutionary.”

The second text quotes a speech by the theologian Marcus Cheng [*sic*] (Chen Chonggui 陳崇桂) at the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in March 1957.³³ Cheng criticised that in many places the churches were forbidden to hold services. Some cadres did not permit donations to the congregations, repairs to church buildings, or even the acceptance of new members. Cheng also quoted a party cadre who called upon the Christians “to throw their God onto the muck heap.” To Cheng this was a blasphemous and unacceptable remark. Church buildings were often occupied by organisations which had nothing to do with the church, and some of them were in a dreadful condition. Some were even used as stables for animals. This caused Cheng to say: “This defiling of our churches is like defiling our ancestral graves, and impresses us very painfully.” Furthermore he saw that the Chinese Church was confronted by a flood of pamphlets criticising religion, which presented Christianity in a distorted way.³⁴

³⁰ Y. T. Wu, “Report on the China Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement from July 1954 to March 1956,” 128.

³¹ “Bishops’ Pastoral Letter of 1956,” in Merwin and Jones, *Documents of the Three-Self Movement*, 143–49, 145.

³² “Shanghai Manifesto,” in Merwin and Jones, *Documents of the Three-Self Movement*, 147–49.

³³ “Marcus Cheng’s Speech,” in Merwin and Jones, *Documents of the Three-Self Movement*, 151–56.

³⁴ At about the same time Y. T. Wu wrote in an article published in an English magazine *China Reconstructs*: “Is the social environment so unfavourable? Chinese Chris-

Christians had also followed the call to express criticism about irregularities as part of the “Hundred Flowers Campaign.” When the “Anti-Rightists Campaign” began soon after, so-called “rightists” were also identified and persecuted from within the churches. As Wickeri emphasises, church leaders such as K. H. Ting were prominent in their criticism of such “rightists.”³⁵ According to research done by Wickeri thousands of Christians, pastors, and students were criticised during this campaign and were banished to distant regions of China. Some committed suicide out of desperation.

3. A CHINESE REVIEW OF THE 1950S

The sinologist and historian Mechthild Leutner has shown that in the meantime the developments of the 1950s are being critically commented on in Chinese academic and literary works—for a number of reasons.³⁶ While the political leadership may try to retain their monopoly of interpretation, in the meantime other protagonists are participating in a new construction of the 1950s. The perspectives of the party-state commence with the “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of Our Country” (*Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi* 關於建國以來黨的若干歷史問題的決議) in 1981. Here the years from 1949 to 1956 are claimed to have followed a “fully correct” political line and achieved “dazzling success” in carrying it out. However the over-hasty speed of the collectivization policies is considered a “mistake.” They speak of “enormous successes” in the years from 1956 to 1966 but also of setbacks. Leutner establishes that since the 1990s, party historians have described history

tians have expressed their hearty approval of the socialist way of life because it is fully in accord with Christ’s teaching . . . The provision of facilities for religious activities, the equal rights enjoyed by Christians in political life today—these are all evidence of the government’s genuine concern for our welfare.” See Y. T. Wu, “The Future of Christianity in China,” in Merwin and Jones, *Documents of the Three-Self Movement*, 175–76, 176.

³⁵ Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China*, 148.

³⁶ Mechthild Leutner, “Parteigeschichte pluralistisch? Neukonstruktionen der 1950er Jahre in Historiographie und Literatur der VR China” [Pluralist Party History? New Designs of the 1950s in Historiography and Literature of the PRC], in Leutner, *Re-thinking China in the 1950s*, 64–89.

as a fragmented complex problem of contradicting evaluations of individual events. Thus the “Anti-Rightists Campaign,” which was still described as “correct” and “necessary” in the resolution from 1981, is judged today by several historians to have been basically wrong. Nevertheless historians who work for the party-state still try “to present a success story of the People’s Republic and [to reinterpret] the serious mistakes as the starting point for new insights.”³⁷

In her analysis of the present historical review of the 1950s Leutner also identifies an alternative perspective: that of the “victims.” Contemporary witnesses, such as farmers, cadres at the grass roots, and intellectuals who had been under attack, were increasingly bringing an (auto-) biographical perspective to bear that represented an extended publicity, which tended to question the interpretation monopoly of the CPC. According to Leutner, works of “victim literature” often name the year 1957 as the dramatic starting point for the persecution of intellectuals.³⁸

4. DEVELOPMENTS FROM 1955 TO 1958 IN A CHAIN LETTER OF THEOLOGIANS

In June 2007 the Chinese theologian Wang Weifan sent me a photocopy of an unpublished document with two handwritten comments: “on the 50th Anniversary of the ‘Anti-Rightists Campaign’” and “It is worthwhile reflecting on the evidence of former times.” This document was a chain letter (*lianhuanxin* 連環信), which a group of young Chinese theologians had used to communicate with each other from 1955 to 1958. They were all graduates from the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary 金陵協和神學院 run by the established Protestant Church. The chain letter within that group of about six theologians worked in the following way: One of the theologians initiated a letter in which he/she usually described their present living and working realities and where they reflected on political, moral, and spiritual issues. This letter was sent on to another member of the group and so forth until in the end the chain letter reached the originator of this missive again. The

³⁷ Ibid., 85.

³⁸ Ibid.

matters raised in the letter became an object of discussion among the participants. In 1958 the chain letter led to harsh criticism of the group and was placed in the archives of the United Front Department in Nanjing. In 1979 it was given back to the theologian Wang.

The short preface to the chain letter, written collectively, states that in the 1950s it would probably have been more sensible to have refrained from expressing oneself in oral or written form. However in their work the young theologians met with many things that they did not understand. And they felt the need to exchange ideas with each other in the form of this chain letter. They had not expected that the chain letter would be held against them as a crime at the beginning of the “Anti-Rightists Campaign.” They were really of the opinion that the letter was more or less apolitical. Here however they experienced what Mühlhahn confirmed looking back at the 1950s:

Chinese “mass line” socialism produced a highly decentralized method of coercion, and a pervasive voluntarism of the victims as well as the victimizers. Such a mechanism drew in everybody and nobody was allowed to remain outside.³⁹

I will present the contributions to the chain letter anonymously—except for those by Wang Weifan. For it was he who sent me the document and wanted us “to reflect on the evidence of former times.”

Wang Weifan, born in 1927, graduated in 1955 from the Theological Seminary of Nanjing. His first position was a pastor in the town of Zhenjiang 鎮江. However in 1955 he was called back to Nanjing, where he then became responsible for church publications. In 1958 Wang became a victim of the “Anti-Rightists Campaign.” K. H. Ting, the President of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary until 2010, denounced him.⁴⁰ As a result Wang was ordered to do forced labour in Qixiashan 棲霞山 in the north of Jiangsu 江蘇. During the Cultural Revolution he was accused of spying for the U.S.A. In those days Wang thought about committing suicide. After 1969 he had to work in a factory. Not until 1979 was he able to transfer to the Institute of Religious Studies at Nanjing University. In 1981 he returned to the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, where he then taught until 1999. Wickeri

³⁹ Mühlhahn, “Repaying Blood Debt,” 47.

⁴⁰ See Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China*, 151.

writes that Wang Weifan did not feel “any bitterness towards those who accused him in 1958.”⁴¹ According to Wickeri in those days, other colleagues at the seminary besides Ting had also criticised Wang, but only Ting had apologised to Wang in a church service after 1979. It was also Ting who then called Wang back to the seminary.

Content of the Chain Letter

1955

The first letter is dated from November 1955. A long paragraph in this letter concerns the following occurrence. In an agricultural production cooperative a pastor was “railed against by the masses” because he had left his work in order to pray at the bedside of a Christian who was seriously ill. The pastor writes that he is grateful for the criticism of the masses and now knows that it is unscientific, yes even “counter-revolutionary” to pray for the healing of the sick. He concludes, that it is far more important to educate the Christians to go to see a doctor when they are ill.

Another theologian reports that in a church meeting recently four counter-revolutionaries had been exposed. A colleague answers:

Your news about the exposure of four counter-revolutionaries is welcome news. But some Christians are afraid of the study sessions, in which a mark of division should be drawn between counter-revolution and church.

A woman pastor reports, Mr Y had made a serious political mistake, as he had decorated the Christmas tree with a badge of the “reactionary Guomindang.” When the “comrade from the government” discovered the badge, Mr Y declared that he did not know what kind of object it was. The pastor concludes, “The government could have had him thrown into prison for that. But they were very generous. Mr Y got away with three-month political studies.”

A pastor asks what his personal contribution to the first Five Year Plan can be, and a colleague answers: “Plant sunflowers and trees.” Another one adds: it is a case of encouraging the Christians to partici-

⁴¹ Ibid., 154.

pate actively in production. The dominant ideology at that time is also reflected in another statement in the chain letter: “Our country is achieving fantastic peaks in the building up of socialism at present. Within three years China will complete the socialist revolution.” That the economic situation of the young pastors was precarious in spite of the alleged “fantastic peaks in the building up of socialism” is shown by the comments in the margins, such as the one by Wang Weifan, where in one place he asks that an envelope should be used at least twice. This was a good way of saving money. Elsewhere Wang states that a journey to Shanghai was too expensive for him as he lived in Nanjing.

1956

In 1956 Wang reported that during a great “criticism session” within his church “counter-revolutionary elements” had been taken into custody. These arrests were to be welcomed. His father-in-law was also among the “counter-revolutionaries.” Wang reported that his wife had taken a correct stand and had distanced herself from her father.

A colleague brings up a question from his congregation. What was to be done when a Christian was recruited as a member of the Communist Party—must he then give up his Christian faith? The person concerned had asked the pastor for advice in this question. The pastor’s answer is clear. He asks why people should expect Christians to give up their faith. The Church—just like the Chinese Communist Party—has the task to make a contribution for humanity and she must be put in a position to be able to make this contribution again. In December 1956 one of the pastors turns away from Christianity. He now addresses his friends as “comrades” and informs them that he has said goodbye to his faith. He says he now knows that God does not exist. At first none of his colleagues reacts to this information.

1957

A woman pastor tells the group that she wants to study history now, for “work of people like us is really rather insecure.” In the chain letter the information of the former pastor who had declared himself to be an atheist is now taken up. A friend asks the others to keep the information to themselves. He himself hopes to be able to change his col-

league's mind. In his perspective there is hope, for the colleague had promised to think his decision over once more.

A pastor complains that all the pastors are being constantly pressurised to change their profession and re-train for something else. She herself does not see any reason to change as she had quite consciously chosen this profession. Wang agrees with her and says he is of the opinion that the work of a pastor is just as valuable as that of a party secretary. Christianity is of very real social and moral importance.

In August 1957 one member of the group declares that continuous existence of the letter is in danger. At the beginning of September Wang reports that in Nanjing Union Theological Seminary there have been discussions on "the phenomenon of rightists." However "no anti-rightists" have yet been discovered there. Wang considers the campaign to be a "test of God." A woman pastor working in a rural area reports of massive struggles against "rightists" in her congregation and adds: "I do have a great need to discuss my questions with you." One of the friends expresses his concern that the church is at present being too radical in going against "bad elements" within its own ranks. It would be better to exercise restraint and to be more concerned about the existence of the Church.

In October 1957 the former pastor informs his former colleagues that he is now working as a teacher. In November the woman pastor from the rural area reports that there are constant campaigns and that for her to be able to return to the town would be "like being liberated from a cage."

1958

In January 1958 a further member of the group announces her departure from theology. The former woman pastor is now working as the representative of the party-state in the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB).⁴² The former pastor and present teacher says goodbye to the chain letter and states that he no longer sees any point in exchanging ideas with the group. In February 1957 the former woman pastor and present staff member of the RAB exercises self-criticism. She has realised that she did not yet trust the Chinese Communist Party enough. A

⁴² The establishment of a Religious Affairs Bureau on the national level took place in the year 1954.

pastor reports on the plans for building a church in his congregation that have been stopped by the party. He is of the opinion: “The instructions of the CPC are correct. I now recognise that. For the party has an eye on everything, but we Christians only see certain aspects of things.”

The last entry in the chain letter is from 14 March 1958—a woman pastor states: “My thinking cannot keep up with the times.”

5. A CHINESE THEOLOGIAN PERSONALLY COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PAST: A THIRD PERSPECTIVE?

Leading personalities of the established Chinese Church still today maintain their enthusiasm for the “socialist system” of the PRC.⁴³ The leadership of the established Chinese Church when contextualising Christianity has always put the main emphasis on ethics and morals. The former Party Chairman of the CPC, Jiang Zemin 江澤民, declared in 2003 that it was a question of “using religious dogmas . . . and religious morals in the service of socialism.” A scholar of religious studies, Ye Luhua 業露華, found that as religion in China is not allowed to interfere in political issues ethics remains its field of action.

To what extent does Wang’s attitude differ from the positions of his church leadership?

Wang Weifan criticised making Christianity one with its ethical, moral statements. In 2002 he emphasised: “A religion that is holy, cannot be reduced to ethics and morals.”⁴⁴ In the end, Wang had

⁴³ As late as 2002 a high-ranking representative of the Protestant Chinese Church declared: “The existing socialist system in our country is more fully perfect than all of China’s past social systems or all the present capitalist societies world-wide . . . God wills us Christians to . . . support this system.” See Ji Jianhong 季劍虹, “Aiguo aijiao shi Zhongguo Jidutu geng meng Shen suo yuena” 愛國愛教使中國基督徒更蒙神所悅納 [If the Chinese Christians Love Their Country and Their Church God Will Rejoice in Them Even More], *Tianfeng* 3 (2002): 32–33.

⁴⁴ Wang Weifan, “Tan ban hao jiaohui yu shenxue sixiang jianshe” 談辦好教會與神學思想建設 [On the Objective of Attaining Good Governance for Our Church and the Enhancement of Theological Reflection], in *Shinian juju: Wang Weifan wenji (Yi jiu jiu qi zhi er ling ling qi)* 十年踽踽——汪維藩文集（一九九七至二零零七） [Walking Lonely for Ten Years: Selected Works of Wang Weifan (1997–2007)] (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 2009), 455–67, 463.

probably discovered through his own experience with the campaigns in the 1950s and the 1970s as well as the crushing of the student protests in 1989, that Christianity brought a trans-moral truth into the social debate.⁴⁵ Zhuo Xinping comes to a similar conclusion: The optimism of former times has disappeared. In view of raging corruption and other horrible social phenomena, many Christians have come to a deeper understanding of what is behind the Christian concept of sin.⁴⁶ In this context the concept of sin reflects the fact that human beings cannot catch up with the consequences of certain deeds.⁴⁷

Leutner identifies two perspectives for the current way Chinese authors deal with the 1950s: that of the party-state and that of the victims. In my opinion the way chosen by the theologian Wang Weifan represents a third perspective. Wang sent me the document of the chain letter without any further comments. It contains only two handwritten comments: “On the 50th Anniversary of the ‘Anti-Rightists Campaign,’” and “It is worthwhile reflecting on the evidence of former times.” At no point does the theologian represent himself as a victim, nor take on any perspective of the party-state. His first and foremost wish seems to be to document things. But what is documented reveals also his own mistaken judgements, his internalisation of ideological indoctrination by the party and personal guilt, for example when Wang supports the condemnation of his father-in-law as a

⁴⁵ In meditating on the events of 1989 and on Psalm 67:2 he wrote: “It is so dark that we cannot see our hands before our eyes. Even less are we able to fathom the innermost recesses of our heart. The darkness is . . . like a wall. If you, God, had not let there be light I would have continued in my ever-lasting slumber . . .” For a German translation see Wang Weifan, *Die Weisheit der Lilien: Meditationen eines chinesischen Christen* [The Wisdom of the Lilies: Meditations of a Chinese Christian] (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2010), 102–103. The meditation was published in Chinese as: Wang Weifan, *Moxiangji* 默想集 [Collection of Meditations] (Nanjing: Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, 1997), 154.

⁴⁶ Zhuo Xinping, “Die Bedeutung des Christentums für Chinas Modernisierung” [The Significance of Christianity to Modernization in China], in Gänßbauer, *Christentum im Reich der Mitte*, 78–86, 84. Zhuo’s text is a published version of a speech delivered in German at the University of Hamburg on October 29, 1997.

⁴⁷ In 1957 Wang had written a hymn based on the Song of Solomon 2:10–14, one line of which reads: “The winter is past, rain is gone. Flowers fill the earth, birdsong in the air . . .” The lyrics draw an idealized picture (of the “new society”?) and lack any reference to God or Christ. After the Cultural Revolution Wang completed the hymn with the following chorus: “My Lord Jesus . . . In darkest valleys, I long for you. I will go with you.” See Wickeri, “Theological Reorientation in Chinese Protestantism, 1949–1984 (Part 2),” 122f. Ahrens assumes that Wang gained his Christological insight from living through the years of terror campaigns: The essence of the Christian message lies in God’s power to forgive sin in the risen Christ.

counter-revolutionary. Wang does not justify himself later for his mistaken judgement—in contrast to Chinese authors with a party-state perspective, who tend to explain that in those days they did not have as much knowledge as they do today. Wang, who himself suffered massive persecution during and after the “Anti-Rightists Campaign,” does not portray his suffering—in contrast to some Chinese texts that can be considered to be written from the victim’s perspective.

Wang seems to suggest a way of reappraisal that is grounded in the religious tradition of dealing with guilt. Yu Jie 余杰, born in 1973, a Chinese intellectual and a Christian like Wang, introduced a central idea from the field of religious thinking into the discourse on the Cultural Revolution: remorse or the willingness to change one’s ways (*chanhui* 懺悔). The aim of remorse is to re-create respect and trust between people. The pre-requisite for remorse, according to Yu, is the recognition of personal guilt.⁴⁸

By disclosing this chain letter Wang Weifan makes an important contribution to the historical reappraisal of the 1950s. He is committed to finding the truth and starts by documenting information from that time. At the same time, here is a very personal piece of historical reappraisal. Wang does not succumb to the temptation to present himself as a victim. Just as Yu Jie, he is also convinced that only an honest look at one’s own entanglement can make healing possible. And like the author Feng Jikai 馮驥才, who has made extensive study of the Cultural Revolution,⁴⁹ Wang’s attitude seems also to be moulded by the recognition that an “extreme political situation,” such as the campaigns of the 1950s in China, often flings people backwards and forwards between the categories of victim and victimiser.⁵⁰ In my opinion Wang Weifan sets first signs for a possibly fundamentally different discourse within a younger generation of Chinese theologians on the relationship between the Church and the existing social system in China and on how to deal with a difficult past.

⁴⁸ Yu Jie, *Ai yu tong de bianyuan* 愛與痛的邊緣 [At the Borders of Love and Pain], (Hong Kong: Xin Si Lu, 2002), 153.

⁴⁹ Feng Jikai, *Yi bai ge ren de shi nian* 一百個人的十年 [Ten Years in the Life of One Hundred People] (Changchun: Shidai wenyi, 2004).

⁵⁰ See Monika Gänßbauer, *Trauma der Vergangenheit: Die Rezeption der Kulturrevolution und der Schriftsteller Feng Jikai* [Trauma of the Past: The Reception of the Cultural Revolution and the Writer Feng Jikai] (Dortmund: Projekt, 1996), 568.