

Wang Weifan (1927–2015): Theologian, Intellectual, Artist

Monika Gaenssbauer

In Wang Weifan 汪維藩 we meet a unique theologian, a free spirit deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, and a gifted poet and calligrapher. Wang is known in China not only as the author of spiritual texts. He dealt with China's early encounters with Christianity, investigated the effects of political campaigns from the 1950s to 1960s, and courageously voiced criticism where he recognized undesirable developments in his church.

Biographical Information¹

Wang was born in 1927 in Taizhou, Jiangsu. His mother was a devout Buddhist. Wang lost his father when he was seven and his mother when he was 17. On his deathbed, Wang's father, who had been an opium addict, asked Wang's mother to take her own life and the life of his son. The father was worried that they wouldn't be able to get by in life. But the mother acted against his will. Wang Weifan has often described the deep love of his mother that made him feel the love of God. Later experiences during the Sino-Japanese war tragically drove her to suicide.

In the house of a wealthy aunt Wang Weifan received his solid classical education. As an elementary school teacher he came into contact with Christianity and in 1947, while studying literature at the National Central University in Nanjing, Wang became a Christian. He studied at the Hangzhou Theological Seminary, which later joined a number of seminaries to form the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary in 1952. He graduated from there in 1955.

During the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1958 he was criticized and sent to work in the countryside. After 1969 Wang was accused of espionage for the US and was sent to work in a factory. His situation in 1969 nearly drove him to suicide. He was separated from his wife and his children for eight years.

Dr. Monika Gaenssbauer is since 2020 professor of Chinese language and culture at Stockholm University. She presented this paper at the symposium "Shaping the Outlook on Life – Education and Religion in Chinese Contexts" which was organized by Esther-Maria Guggenmos, Lund University, in cooperation with Lund Mission Society. The symposium took place in Lund on May 4, 2023. See also the conference report by Prof. Guggenmos in *RCTC* 2023, no. 3, pp. 23-26.

1 For biographical information on Wang I am indebted to Isabel Hess-Friemann's article: "Wang Weifan. Evangelischer Theologe und Poet (1927–2015)," in: *China heute* 2015, no. 4, pp. 246-248.

After the Cultural Revolution Wang joined the faculty of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary and became head of the publications department. He quickly rose as a popular teacher, prolific writer, and key theological thinker within the Chinese church. In 1989, during the Tian'anmen demonstrations, he sided with the students, which made him politically vulnerable.

He retired in 1999, in the midst of Bishop K.H. Ting's programme of theological reconstruction which Wang Weifan criticized quite openly. Wang Weifan passed away in the year 2015.

Wang Weifan as Theologian

Wang Weifan describes God as the Lord of the cosmos and as life-giving God (*shengsheng shen* 生生神).² He argues that the intellectual basis for this idea can be found in the *Yijing* 易经 (*Book of Changes*) which is about the creation of the myriad of beings. For Wang the *Yijing* was the source of many Chinese thought traditions.³ In his view it was not possible to understand Chinese culture without a basic understanding of the *Yijing*.

Change and constancy of everything is in God's hand.⁴ This view of history can maintain an optimistic attitude towards the future of humanity. But it is not blind optimism, it includes a profound awareness of an unexpected development. Wang pointed out that for instance in peaceful times one must not forget the danger of losing peace. In prosperous times one should be aware of the possibility of perishing, and in times of a good government one needs to keep in mind that the situation might change to disorder and chaos.

For Wang, the life-giving God is constantly involved in the process of creation, recreation, and new creation of the entire cosmos. Wang understands salvation in terms of renewal of creation. He states: When Adam left Eden, the search of the creator God for human beings began. Just as the father in the parable of the prodigal son finds no rest until he can welcome the prodigal son home again.⁵

For Wang Weifan, Jesus was the one who perfected life (*wanshan shengming* 完善生命). In his view the God-man of Jesus Christ is easily understood in the Chinese context because in Chinese traditional culture there is a strong notion of the unity between heaven and human (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一).⁶ Wang writes: Jesus Christ's obedience generated life, destroyed death, redeemed and fulfilled human life, and completed the variety of human goodness and beauty, in order to crown God's creation.⁷ Wang's deep understanding of Jesus as the suffering servant is connected with the suffering Wang himself and the Christian church endured during many campaigns of the 20th century.⁸

2 Alexander Chow, "Wang Weifan's Cosmic Christ," in: *Modern Theology* 2016, no. 3, pp. 384-396.

3 Yuan Yijuan 袁益娟, *Shengsheng shenxue – Wang Weifan shenxue sixiang yanjiu* 生生神学—汪维藩神学思想研究 (Theology of the Life-giving God), Beijing 2010, p. 42.

4 Chen Yongtao, *The Chinese Christology of T.C. Chao*, Leiden 2017, p. 303.

5 Wang Weifan, *Die Weisheit der Lilien. Meditationen eines chinesischen Christen*, ed. and transl. by Monika Gänsbauer, Freiburg i.Br. 2010, p. 41.

6 Chen Yongtao, *The Chinese Christology of T.C. Chao*, p. 306.

7 Yuan Yijuan, *Shengsheng shenxue*, p. 87.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

In the year 2007, Wang Weifan had sent me an unpublished chain letter. This chain letter sheds a very personal light on the political movements of the 1950s and on a period of Chinese (church) history that is often completely left out in publications on Chinese (church) history.⁹

Immediately after the founding of the PRC, the CCP began using mass campaigns. In these campaigns the political elite mobilized the population in order to unleash a broad initiative, to fight against certain political currents or to secure their own rule.

In the spring of 1957, in order to win over the country's educated class, the Chinese leadership initiated the so-called Hundred Flowers Movement in order to encourage more freedom of expression. Soon, however, in the view of the party-state leaders the criticism went too far. In June 1957, the Anti-Rightist Campaign was launched in which all those who had expressed open criticism were punished. By 1958, more than half a million people were sent to the countryside or to factories in order to be re-educated through manual labor. Wang Weifan was one of them.

The chain letter that Wang Weifan had sent me had been a means of communication for a group of young Chinese theologians during the years 1955 to 1958. Ideally, one letter should reach all members of the group, and each member could add a comment to the already existing letter content.

In 1958, the chain letter led to harsh criticism of the group and ended up in the archives of the United Front Department of Nanjing. In 1979, it was returned to Wang Weifan.

In the following I would like to present contents of the chain letter in excerpts:

In 1955, Wang informed his colleagues about the crime that an evangelist was accused of. He was denounced as a spy who allegedly passed on information about the Chinese army to foreign countries. Such imperialistic theological thinking must be fought against, writes Wang.

Whether people would still come to church services after the establishment of the agricultural production cooperatives is a question that another theologian takes up. In one cooperative, the pastor was attacked by a crowd of people because he had left work in order to pray at the bedside of a parish member who was seriously ill. The pastor writes that he is grateful for the criticism and knows now that it is downright counter-revolutionary to pray for healing. His conclusion is: The Lord has educated me through the masses.

In 1956, Wang reported that his father-in-law was arrested as a counter-revolutionary. Wang reports that his wife "behaved correctly" and distanced herself from her father. In December of that year one of the pastors turns away from Christianity. He tells his former colleagues that he has become aware that God does not exist.

In 1958, a pastor reported about plans to build a church that had been stopped by the party. He writes: "The instructions given by the party are correct ... the party has a broader perspective, we Christians, on the other hand, only have a partial view."

The last entry in the chain letter dates from March 1958.

9 Monika Gänssbauer, "Wir begrüßen die Entlarvung der Konterrevolutionäre ...? – Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung eines chinesischen Theologen," in: *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* 2009, Berlin 2009, pp. 49-64.

This chain letter is a very personal and surely painful document. I find it remarkable that Wang Weifan sent me this letter and thus opened up space for reflection. His comment accompanying the letter was that it is worthwhile to reflect on the traces of the past.

Wang, in my view, introduces a third perspective on dealing with the past in China. He does not follow the tradition of completely leaving out the experiences of the decades of the 1950s to 1970s that can often be found in China. Neither does he follow a narrative of exculpation. He does not present himself as a pure victim of the political campaigns of these decades. His aim is to document. But what is documented here also shows his own misjudgements and wrongdoings. Wang places the events in the narrative of his Christian faith which acknowledges failure in life but also offers forgiveness. This is an important contribution to memory discourses in China.

Wang Weifan as Intellectual

In a text of 2015 that is dedicated to Wang's thoughts and ministry, Chen Xun focuses on Wang Weifan's contribution to a humanistic tradition.¹⁰ As Chen points out, Wang connected the humanistic tradition with the spirit of his Christian faith. His writing is characterized by empathy, a sense of responsibility, and literary aesthetics. Wang has regularly been using the form of scholarly essay (*xueshu sanwen* 学术散文).¹¹

Wang resisted a trend of systematization in writing because he feared that this might lead to mechanization (*jixiehua* 机械化). Questions about what makes a human being human, and how one ought to treat other people were at the centre of his reflections.¹²

For Wang, patriotism meant standing on the side of the people. He once wrote: "The Lord has redeemed us, but this doesn't mean that we should stay away from the people. As someone who belongs to the Lord one must not renounce the world but instead do good for humanity and society."¹³

In Wang's view, the suffering of the church from the 1950s through the 1970s helped Christians in China to unite with the people and no longer drift apart from their people.¹⁴

Wang connected the sufferings of the peoples of Asia in modern times with the lamentation of the prophets of Israel. In the 1980s he wrote: "A people that is not devoted to reflecting deeply will run the risk of following someone or something blindly and is in danger of losing itself."¹⁵

In the 1980s, Wang also took up issues of religious policy. He pointed out that one should not treat all unregistered Christian communities as illegal. There could be many

10 Chen Xun 陳馴, "Yituan liehuo – Wang Weifan renxue tanjiu" 一團烈火—汪維藩人學探究 (A Blaze – An Exploration of Wang Weifan's Anthropology), in: Yao Xiyi 姚西伊 *et al.* (eds.), *Geng fu zhi, chi zi xin. Wang Weifan sixiang yu shigong zhi yanjiu* 更夫志, 赤子心. 汪維藩思想與事工之研究 (The Aspiration of a Night Watchman, and a Pure Heart. A Study on Wang Weifan's Thoughts and Ministry), Hong Kong 2015, pp. 101-138.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Yuan Yijuan, *Shengsheng shenxue*, p. 181.

14 Kevin Yao Xiyi, "Wang Wei-fan's Evangelical Theology," in: Paulus Huang (ed.), *Yearbook of Chinese Theology 2016*, Leiden 2016, pp. 3-16, here p. 7.

15 Chen Xun, "Yituan liehuo – Wang Weifan renxue tanjiu," p. 131.

reasons why Christian groups would not want to join the patriotic Three-Self-Organization. He pleaded for a generous attitude.

In 1982, he criticized the wording of negative religious freedom in the Constitution: “In the Constitution we do not find a passage added to the declaration of freedom of opinion, information, publication and assembly that states that citizens have the freedom not to speak their own mind, or not to publish and not to gather. Only to the sentence that citizens have the freedom to have a religious belief, a passage was added: citizens of the PRC shall enjoy freedom not to have religious belief. This hurts the feelings of believers.”¹⁶

Today’s formulation in the Constitution is as follows:

“Citizens of the PRC shall enjoy freedom of religious belief.

“No state organ, social organization or individual shall coerce citizens to believe in or not to believe in any religion ...”¹⁷

In 2010, Wang wrote: Our time urgently needs a spiritual renewal. This includes ethics and morals, a civic spirit, social conscience and trust in our faith. Only if China would reform itself politically and make progress intellectually, would there be a better tomorrow.

Wang did not see a contrast between Christianity and Chinese culture. On the contrary, he stated: It is reckless and arrogant to evangelize the country without respecting and understanding its cultural tradition first.¹⁸

He described traditional Chinese culture as a mother that can nurture Chinese theology. For him, the low regard for traditional Chinese culture was one reason for the poverty of Chinese theology.¹⁹ He saw “culture as a mirror, different cultures being different mirrors. But in each mirror alike we find some aspect of Christ reflected.”²⁰

Wang writes at one point that Chan Buddhism has influenced him strongly – for example with its preoccupation with riddles that cannot be explained (*gongan* 公案). He has repeatedly circled the mystery of God in texts that are deeply memorable. Yuan Yijuan has also pointed out Daoist influences on Wang’s writing. The Daoists were deeply aware of the limits of language and their texts are often connected with mysticism. Wang Weifan also was of the opinion that there is a limit to what can be said about God.²¹

He draws on other sources of Chinese tradition, too. In one text he quotes Confucius’ saying: “While you do not know life, how can you know death” (*wei zhi sheng yan zhi si* 未知生焉知死). And he continues as follows: “Christians know life and death through Christ. Life in its prolongation leads to death. This is the beginning of life on a higher level. For Christians it is more important to know life than to know death.”²²

16 See: Monika Gänsbauer, *Parteistaat und Protestantische Kirche. Religionspolitik im nachmaoistischen China*, Frankfurt a.M. 2004, pp. 62-63.

17 “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China,” see: www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372964.htm (as accessed on Oct. 9, 2023).

18 Cited in: Kevin Yao Xiyi, “Wang Wei-fan’s Evangelical Theology,” p. 11.

19 Isabel Hess-Friemann, “Wang Weifan. Evangelischer Theologe und Poet (1927–2015),” p. 248.

20 Yuan Yijuan, *Shengsheng shenxue*, p. 102.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

Wang Weifan as the Author of Spiritual Texts and as Calligrapher

In 1988, a collection of Wang Weifan's meditations, translated into English by Janice and Philip Wickeri, was published. The title of this collection is *Lilies of the Field*.²³

I myself have translated a collection of Wang's meditations into German.²⁴ The book entitled *Die Weisheit der Lilien* was published in 2010. In that publication we chose a few meditations that were also included in *Lilies of the Field* but the texts for my translation were chosen mostly from two collections which Wang Weifan had published in Chinese.

Wang Weifan who was a gifted calligrapher even contributed a few calligraphies to *Die Weisheit der Lilien*.

At the end of this brief article I would like to let two of Wang's meditations speak for themselves:

The first is on Matthew 6:28:

Lilies of the Field²⁵

The beauty of life does not lie in what we put on, but in bearing life's hardships without losing sight of its charm, in encountering the vagaries of the world without losing sight of its beauty.

The adornments that the father gives to his daughters and sons are carved and painted in the deepest recesses of the soul.

The tiny flowers of the field ask nothing for themselves and covet nothing. They are silent; but in their silence, they adorn the field. Their lives are brief; they appear quickly, go quickly. Yet what remains is their fragrance which they leave behind to the land that nourished them.

The second meditation is on the topic of ascension:

Why Do You Stand Looking into Heaven? (Acts 1:11)²⁶

Why do you stand looking into heaven?

Though Jesus Christ has ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God, he is still in our hearts, yours and mine. Christ surrounds us. He listens and is watching. The hands of Jesus Christ still soothe our wounds, yours and mine.

23 Wang, Weifan, *Lilies of the Field. Meditations for the Church Year*, transl. and ed. by Janice and Philip Wickeri, Nashville 1993.

24 Wang Weifan, *Die Weisheit der Lilien. Meditationen eines chinesischen Christen*, ed. and transl. by Monika Gänsbauer, Freiburg i.Br. 2010.

25 Wang Weifan, *Lilies of the Field. Meditations for the Church Year*, p. 9.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

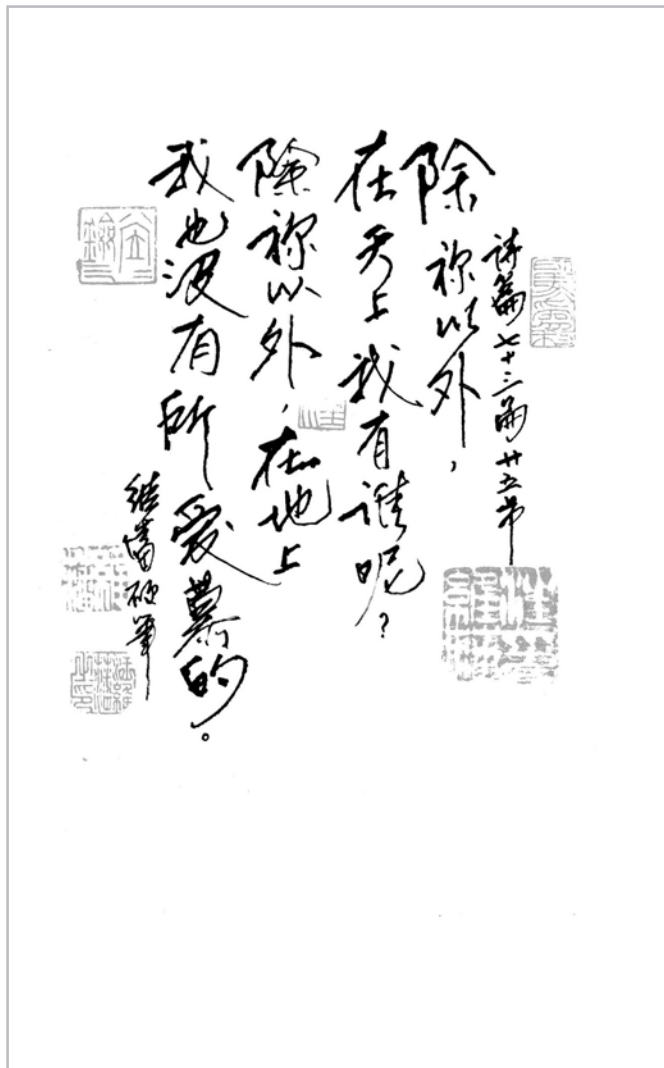
A rising sun, Christ ascends to heaven, emitting light that covers the mountains and fills the valleys. Jesus Christ is our North Star, brilliant and crystal clear, glimmering in the far reaches of the cosmos, guiding us home, you and me.

Christ, who has transcended time and space, still remains within creation and history. Christ upholds creation and guides human history. All that came from God is in the end guided back to God through Christ.

Our life is already in Christ and yet remains hidden within God. It unfolds in heaven and on earth as a drama played for the angels and the world to see.

Concluding Remarks

As mentioned at the beginning of this contribution, I see Wang Weifan as a unique Chinese theologian and intellectual who developed his very own strands of thought that combine his faith with Chinese traditions in a personal way. It is lamentable that in today's China his theology is not given as much attention as would be desirable.



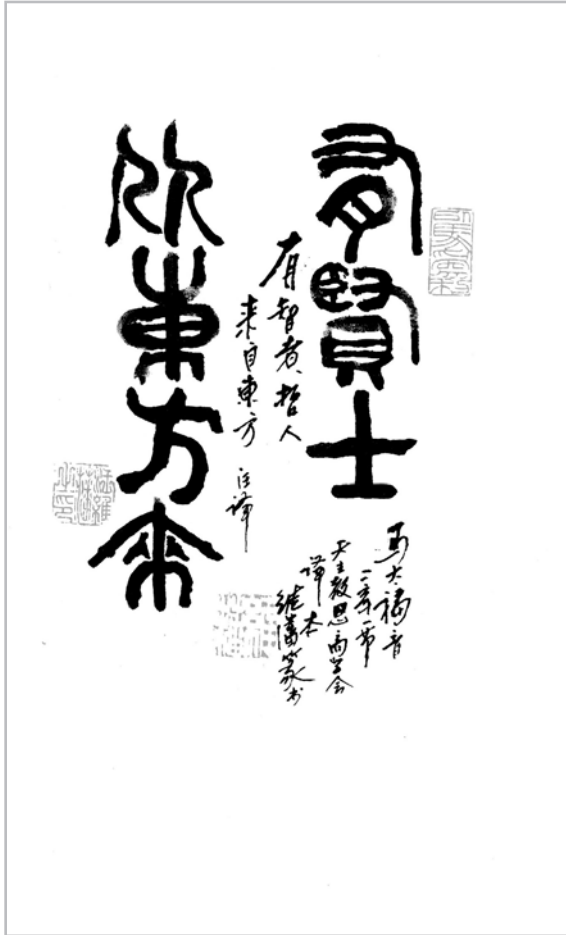
"Whom have I in heaven but you?"

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you."

Psalm 73:25

Calligraphy by Wang Weifan.

Photo: Monika Gaenssbauer.



"Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem."
Matthew 2:1
Calligraphy by Wang Weifan.
Photo: Monika Gaenssbauer.



Easter Meditation: "He is not here."
Calligraphy by Wang Weifan.
Photo: Monika Gaenssbauer.