




## "We—For the Sake of Faith":

### Wang Mingdao's Critique of Modernist Theology and His Theological Controversies

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**Abstract:** This paper explores Wang Mingdao's 1955 publication *We—For the Sake of Faith*, analyzing his critique of modernist theology and its impact on contemporary theological and ecclesiastical developments within Chinese Christianity. Utilizing literature analysis and comparative theological methods, this study reveals how Wang responded to modernist theology's challenges to core Christian doctrines, especially those concerning Christ's resurrection and second coming. The study further examines Wang's theological affirmations and positions, highlighting how his opposition to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement led to accusations of harboring "counter-revolutionary political motives." By comparing Wang Mingdao's primary arguments with modern theological viewpoints, this paper elucidates the underlying theological divergences and tensions. Finally, it emphasizes that *We—For the Sake of Faith* became a foundational text in the ongoing reception history concerning church-state separation and doctrinal fidelity within the modern Chinese Christian context, significantly influencing religious practice and providing essential theological resources for subsequent movements advocating religious freedom and church autonomy.

**Keywords:** Wang Mingdao, Modernist Theology, Three-Self Patriotic Movement, Counter-revolutionary, Martyrdom

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## Introduction

Among the numerous documents in the history of Chinese Christianity, Wang Mingdao (1900-1991, 王明道)'s *We—For the Sake of Faith* undoubtedly occupies a distinctive and prominent position. This text not only served as a crucial historical source for the debates within the Christian community regarding the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the early 1950s, but it also exerted a long-lasting influence on the church's self-understanding and practical orientation in China. As scholar Ying Fuk-tsang has noted, *We—For the Sake of Faith* represents a monumental work that encapsulates Wang Mingdao's stance and resolve, later becoming a classic manifesto for those opposing the organizational framework of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. (Ying 2010, p.128) He further emphasizes in another article that, even today, *We—For the Sake of Faith* remains a resounding cry and emblem for Chinese house churches that refuse to join the Three-Self organization, resist its interference in matters of faith, and even oppose state intrusion into religious freedom. In his view, the text embodies a spirit of struggle that is willing to pay any price "for the sake of faith," a spirit that has profoundly inspired generations of believers caught in the tensions between church and state in China, establishing a vital paradigm for the ethos of "holy disobedience" in the history of Chinese Christianity. (Ying 2025) In addition, scholar Yuan Hao observes that Wang Mingdao's uncompromising attitude and his spirit of sacrificing everything for the sake of faith continue to resonate today. From the 1980s through the 1990s, his tradition of "holy disobedience" influenced house church leaders such as Yang Xinfan in Xiamen, Yuan Xiangchen in Beijing, Lin Xiangao in Guangzhou, and Wu Weizun in Lanzhou. This legacy has also been inherited by team-based house churches as well as emerging house church movements across China (Yuan 2016, p.95).

However, to fully grasp the historical significance of *We—For the Sake of Faith*, it is insufficient merely to situate it within its concrete historical context; a more nuanced textual analysis is required. Through a close reading of the text and a comparative examination of the intellectual currents it sought to critique, we can more clearly discern how Wang Mingdao employed theological language and argumentative strategies to address the pressing challenges to faith within a complex historical setting. Although previous scholarship, including the works of Leung Ka-lun and Ying Fuk-tsang, has touched upon the historical background of this text (Leung 2001, pp. 125–131; Ying 2010, pp. 97–147; Liu 2012, pp. 244–288; Ni 2025, pp. 271–330; Harvey 2002, chap. 4; Vala 2008, pp. 66–83; Payk 2024, chap. 4), it has yet to provide a thorough textual interpretation, particularly lacking a comparative analysis with the theological trajectories of those whom Wang criticized before and

after the controversy. This paper seeks to fill this research gap by offering a more comprehensive presentation of the text's meaning and theological significance.

From a longer historical perspective, however, the sharp antithesis that Wang drew in 1955 between "fundamentalist" and "modernist" conceptions of the faith did not arise ex nihilo in the early People's Republic. It had already crystallized within the Chinese Protestant community during the 1920s and 1930s. In the Republican period, Chinese "modernist" or "liberal" theologians—figures such as T. C. Chao (趙紫宸), and the network around the YMCA and Yenching and Nanjing seminaries—sought to appropriate higher criticism, evolutionary theory, and the Social Gospel, and to relate Christianity positively to nationalism and cultural reconstruction. By contrast, revivalist and evangelical circles associated with the China Inland Mission, North China Theological Seminary, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Keswick-influenced groups, and urban independent assemblies (including Wang's own Beijing Christian Tabernacle) insisted on biblical inerrancy, premillennial eschatology, and a strict separation from "worldly" culture and politics (Yao 2003; Ni 2022, pp. 187–217). As early as the 1930s Wang had publicly attacked works such as Chao's *The Life of Jesus* and Chinese translations of Harry Fosdick as embodiments of an "unbelieving faction," urging separation from modernist institutions and teachers (Ni 2024, pp. xxiv–xxv). The conflict that erupted around *We—For the Sake of Faith* in 1955 therefore reactivated a pre-existing fault line: the Republican-era struggle between fundamentalist and modernist camps was now re-staged under socialist revolutionary conditions, with many former modernist leaders becoming the theological backbone of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and Wang consciously situating himself within the older fundamentalist tradition.

This study is concerned with the historical and political context in which Wang Mingdao composed *We—For the Sake of Faith*. During the 1950s, Chinese Christianity came under intense political pressure. As a prominent Christian leader, how did Wang speak out on behalf of the Christian community? Why did he, in such a historical context, refuse to remain silent in the face of the Three-Self Movement and its leaders, choosing instead to publicly critique modernist theology and defend the faith? Furthermore, in the broader context of apologetics, on what specific aspects did Wang's critique of modernist theology primarily focus? Under political pressure—and facing accusations of being "reactionary," "counter-revolutionary," or "unpatriotic"—how did Wang use his critique of modernist theology as a means to vindicate his own theological stance? This paper offers a holistic reading and analysis of *We—For the Sake of Faith*, explaining why Wang targeted the thought of figures such as Y. T. Wu (吳耀宗), H. H. Tsui (崔憲詳), K. H. Ting (丁光訓), and Wang

Weifan (汪維藩), while also considering modern theologians' responses to Wang. What significance did this critique hold for the Chinese Christian community of the time? In particular, what principles guided Wang's unwavering position in relation to the organizational framework of the Three-Self Movement? And finally, why was he unwilling to compromise any further?

On the other hand, within the historical development of Chinese Christian thought, Wang Mingdao's *We—For the Sake of Faith* was originally an apologetic work directed against modernist theology, emphasizing an uncompromising commitment to doctrinal purity and truth. Yet when this text was later reappropriated by leaders of China's house church movement or by overseas Chinese Christians, its original theological meaning was transformed into a faith symbol and identity marker—an essential resource for resisting church-state integration and safeguarding ecclesial independence and spiritual sovereignty. Conversely, within circles affiliated with the Three-Self organization, it continued to be interpreted as a "narrow," "closed," and unpatriotic document that undermined unity. This historical shift raises a significant question: when a theological text functions both within its original context and as a tool for interpretation across time, does the faith content and ecclesial meaning it conveys undergo a qualitative transformation? Is Wang Mingdao's writing to be understood primarily as an apologetic treatise, or has it become a historically reconstructed "symbolic discourse"? This constitutes one of the central issues this paper seeks to address.

### I. The Background of *We—For the Sake of Faith*

Regarding the nature of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, academic and ecclesial circles have long held divergent views. Some scholars contend that the early-1950s Three-Self Movement was essentially a highly political campaign initiated and directed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which, through handpicked church representatives, sought to reshape Christianity so that it operated under comprehensive state control and thus advance the socialist remolding of religion. (Deng 1997, pp. 1–124; Ying and Leung 1996, pp. 1–244; Wickeri 2022, p. 147) By contrast, Wu Yao-tsung—one of the chief architects of the movement—repeatedly stressed in *Tianfeng*, the official church journal, that the Three-Self Movement was a patriotic, unifying, and anti-imperialist initiative launched by Chinese Christians themselves, a necessary historical step toward the church's "de-dependence" and "decolonization." (Wu 1951, pp. 1–3; Wu 1952, pp. 3–7; Wu 1953, pp. 1–3) At the time, Wu publicly denounced certain Chinese Christians as products of imperialism who had long deceived believers and acted unjustly within the

church. (Wu 1954, pp. 5–7) When Wu's statements are situated within the historical context and political dynamics of the time, his rhetorical strategies—and the ways in which he made patriotic declarations under the banner of faith—invite closer examination. In particular, the discourse of *Tianfeng* offers an important textual lens through which to analyze the Three-Self Movement's self-interpretation and its criticisms of those who opposed it.

### 1. The Controversy Before 1955

The journal *Tianfeng*, founded by Y. T. Wu in 1945, was primarily authored by China's "Modernist" or "radical Christian" writers. These contributors were politically aligned with social revolution, opposed the ruling Kuomintang (Nationalist Government), and tended to sympathize with the Chinese Communist Party. Theologically, they embraced modernist theology. (Wang 2007, pp. 1–12) After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, *Tianfeng* became the official organ of the Chinese Christian Church, closely tied to the dominant ideological narrative of the new socialist state. The journal urged Chinese Christians to abandon reactionary thinking and "superstitious" attitudes, calling on them to recognize the new era under the Communist government and to accept the reality of the socialist system. During this period, *Tianfeng* frequently addressed the relationship between religion and politics, even attempting to synthesize Marxism with Christian doctrines. It is little wonder that some have remarked that, amid the painful adaptation to a changing political order, *Tianfeng* played the role of "patriotic educator," guiding Chinese Christians toward a path aligned with communism. (Leung 1981, p. 19)

Based on the frequent use of phrases such as "eliminating the ideological toxins of imperialism" in *Tianfeng* during the 1950s, it is clear that one of the central political and religious objectives of the Three-Self Movement was to eradicate perceived imperialist influences. *Tianfeng* served as the primary platform through which the movement, led by figures like Y. T. Wu, articulated and advanced its ideological position both internally and externally. (Wu 1953, p. 2)

However, in the early stages of the movement, Wu and his associates realized that not all Christians across the country were eager to heed the call for "patriotism and anti-imperialism" by joining the movement. Consequently, *Tianfeng* began to explicitly criticize the theological positions of the so-called "spiritual faction." For example, on August 21, 1953, it published an article titled "A Group of Readers' Opinions on 'Holiness Without Blemish'", which accused publications from the Gospel Bookstore of vilifying the socialist New China and using piety as a pretext to oppose the reforms promoted by the Three-Self Movement. In particular, concepts emphasized by the spiritual

faction—such as “do not love the world,” “the end of the world,” and “do not be yoked together with unbelievers”—were denounced as “apolitical” notions that allegedly spread the ideological poison of imperialism. (“A Group of Readers’ Opinions on Holiness Without Blemish ” 1953, pp. 16–17)

The Three-Self Movement reframed these spiritual expressions as political offenses, claiming that such doctrines encouraged believers to evade their responsibility in socialist construction and obstructed their solidarity with the broader masses. Y. T. Wu himself went so far as to accuse spiritual leaders—such as Gu Ren’en, Ma Zhaorui, and Jing Dianying of the Jesus Family—in the pages of *Tianfeng* of “willingly serving as tools of imperialism” and of having “lost every moral quality expected of preachers.” They were charged with acts such as “insulting women, harming children, spreading rumors, and engaging in subversive activities,” even allegedly exploiting the principle of religious freedom to carry out anti-government propaganda. (Wu 1954, pp. 6–7)

The Three-Self organization used *Tianfeng* as a tool to publicly denounce the spiritual faction, seeking to influence the broader Christian community through accusation campaigns—isolating key leaders while persuading ordinary believers to join the “patriotic and anti-imperialist” Three-Self Movement. In reality, the spiritual faction’s so-called “apolitical” stance had already been targeted by *Tianfeng* as early as 1952, when Wang Mingdao himself was singled out for criticism. He was accused of lacking patriotism because he had not mobilized believers to contribute to the “Resist America, Aid Korea” campaign (“Report on the Donation Campaign by Christian Groups in Beijing” 1952, p. 10).

For instance, the March 22, 1952 issue of *Tianfeng* published an article titled “Summary of the Christian Union in Xi’an’s Forum on Denouncing American Imperialists for Waging Germ Warfare”. The piece reported that Anglican leader Zhang Kangnian charged Wang with refusing to participate in the donation movement because he had been “infected by the germs of Anglo-American apoliticism.” This framing further linked Wang’s behavior to political disloyalty (“Summary of the Symposium of the Xi’an Christian Council...” 1952, p. 3). Such rhetoric illustrates how *Tianfeng* consistently tied religious identity to political allegiance, articulating the Three-Self Movement’s expectation that Chinese Christianity could no longer maintain an “apolitical” character. Faith and preaching were to be subordinated to the imperatives of patriotism, anti-imperialism, and service to socialist construction.

In essence, this was a struggle over the interpretation of Scripture. *Tianfeng* did not label the Bible itself as harmful; rather, it accused certain individuals—such as Wang Mingdao—of using Scripture and its

interpretation to disseminate "imperialist toxins." This rhetorical strategy aimed to curtail the interpretive autonomy of the spiritual faction, bringing biblical interpretation under state-imposed norms. Thus, the Three-Self Movement carried a pronounced agenda of ideological reformation: through political study and criticism sessions, believers and preachers were expected to prioritize political correctness and subordinate their religious convictions to the prevailing political campaigns. This process effectively sought to erode the church's independence in matters of faith—an expectation that, in Wang Mingdao's view, was utterly unacceptable.

According to Wang Changxin's oral recollections of Wang Mingdao's experiences in the early 1950s, Wang perceived the emerging "accusation and reform campaigns" within the church as part of the Three-Self Movement's effort to reorganize Chinese Christianity, with the ultimate aim of bringing the church fully under a patriotic framework dominated by Modernist leaders. As one of the leading representatives of the Chinese "fundamentalist" camp, Wang felt compelled to uphold the purity of biblical faith. His decision made him one of the most notable cases resisting the Three-Self Movement's attempts at co-optation. Three-Self leaders, under the banners of "patriotism" and "anti-imperialism," demanded that church leaders discard biblical teachings deemed incompatible with socialist construction. Authorities further alleged that some members of the spiritual faction were distorting Scripture and spreading "imperialist ideological toxins" to alienate believers from the government and undermine the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. This campaign effectively forced preachers to ensure that their biblical interpretations aligned with official political positions, under threat of being branded as propagating "imperialist toxins." Yet, despite years of effort, the authorities failed to bring Wang Mingdao and other fundamentalist leaders into the official system. Instead, the implementation of the Three-Self Movement intensified tensions within Chinese Christianity, making the divide between the "spiritual" and "Modernist" factions increasingly pronounced and public (Wang 1997, pp. 52–61).

In response to the deep confusion among believers caused by these developments, Wang Mingdao wrote an article titled "Truth or Poison?" in the winter of 1954, which was published in *Spiritual Food Quarterly* (*Ling Shi Ji Kan*) (Wang 1954, pp. 25–40). The primary target of this piece was the church leaders spearheading the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Although Wang did not name specific individuals, the article was clearly a rebuttal to those in *Tianfeng* who had publicly called for "eliminating the ideological toxins of imperialism."

Wang argued that these leaders, while outwardly claiming to uphold doctrinal purity, were in fact deliberately or inadvertently branding divinely

revealed biblical truths as "poison"—particularly doctrines concerning "the distinction between believers and unbelievers" and the warnings to "beware of false prophets." According to Wang, such labeling would eventually make preachers afraid to proclaim the truth and believers afraid to accept it, leading to the total collapse of the church's faith. Furthermore, he accused the leaders of invoking the slogan of "purging toxins" without ever specifying which doctrines constituted such "toxins." Their real aim, Wang asserted, was to gradually erode the essence of the gospel and the independence of Christian faith, reducing Christianity to an empty shell devoid of spiritual vitality.

Wang's language was strikingly candid and combative. He denounced these leaders as "disciples of Judas Iscariot," "false prophets," and "wolves in sheep's clothing," accusing them of "betraying Jesus with a kiss." His intention was to expose their hypocrisy and self-serving motives. Repeatedly, Wang insisted that these individuals appeared outwardly as Christians but were in fact traitors to the gospel and tools of Satan. The militant tone of his rhetoric revealed his conviction that this was a spiritual battle against Satan himself. He urged believers: "Do not fear, do not compromise," but rather "fight for the truth" with courage, resisting infiltration and ideological reformation from within the church—even at the cost of life itself (Wang 1954, pp. 25–40). Beyond his writings, Wang voiced similar convictions in his sermons, forcefully condemning the practice of labeling biblical words as "poison" in the church's accusation campaigns. His aim was to make believers publicly aware that these very campaigns were the true "poison" threatening the church (Wang 1954).

## 2. Criticism of Wang Mingdao's "Defense of the Faith"

For its readers, Wang Mingdao's article delivered a powerful and uncompromising message. To those spiritual believers wavering between faith and political realities, Wang's emphatic defense of "truth" served as a rallying cry—an exhortation that inspired courage and strengthened convictions. Some believers even testified directly to Wang that reading his words deeply fortified their hearts (Wang 1955). At the same time, the article caused an uproar among leaders of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Wang's unyielding denunciation of certain Three-Self leaders for stigmatizing "truth" as "imperialist ideological poison" struck a nerve. His candid and forceful accusations created an acute sense of threat and humiliation within the movement's leadership (Wang 1997, p. 67). As a result, several prominent Three-Self leaders promptly issued rebuttals, which were subsequently published in *Tianfeng*.

These counterattacks primarily unfolded along several lines. First came the response of K. H. Ting, then president of Nanjing Union Theological



Seminary, who delivered a speech at the Third Standing Committee Meeting of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, held in Shanghai from February 26 to March 4, 1955. Although Ting did not explicitly mention Wang Mingdao by name, his remarks unmistakably constituted a sharp critique of Wang's stance and statements. Ting adopted a dual strategy that was both political and pastoral. He linked the international situation to Christian faith, arguing that imperialism was exploiting Christianity for cultural infiltration and ideological control. In light of intensified imperialist aggression against China, Ting asserted, the church had an even greater responsibility to unite and participate in the nation's anti-imperialist struggle. As he put it: "At the very moment when imperialism is intensifying its aggression against us, we find a small number of people creating division." ("Summary of K. H. Ting's Standing Committee Speech" 1955, p. 7)

This statement framed acts of "division" within the church as responses aligned with, and exploited by, imperialist forces to foster internal disunity. On the theological level, Ting argued that differences in understanding the Christian faith were insufficient grounds for division. He stated: "The various denominations have their own distinctive features in terms of faith, practice, and organization, but this only demonstrates the richness of Christianity. How can this ever serve as an excuse for division?" ("Summary of K. H. Ting's Standing Committee Speech" 1955, p. 7) Here, Ting deliberately undermined Wang Mingdao's insistence on "truth" and "doctrinal purity," portraying it as an excuse for refusing unity—a case of fundamentalists using faith as a façade while, in reality, rejecting solidarity. To this end, Ting vehemently condemned the practice of "arbitrarily branding others as unbelievers," describing it as an affront to the essence of faith and a blasphemy against God: "This is nothing less than accusing people before God, cursing them, asking God not to save them, condemning them, and excluding them from the kingdom of heaven. Who are we to presume to bear false witness before God and slander others in this way?" ("Summary of K. H. Ting's Standing Committee Speech" 1955, p. 7)

This rhetoric directly targeted Wang's critique of Three-Self leaders, characterizing it as a theological overreach and a self-righteous assumption of the role of "judge." Ting accused Wang of disregarding theological diversity and masking an imperialist stance under the guise of religion. Through blending the discourse of Christian faith with patriotic rhetoric, Ting reinforced the legitimacy of the Three-Self Movement while portraying Wang Mingdao's criticisms as untimely, divisive, and potentially complicit with imperialist designs.

At the same time, Pastor H. H. Tsui—General Secretary of the National Christian Council and Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement—joined the ranks of those criticizing Wang Mingdao.

On May 16, Tsui published an article in *Tianfeng* titled "We Must Consolidate and Expand Our Unity," offering a direct rebuttal to Wang's position (Tsui 1955, p. 4).

Tsui rejected Wang's assertion that there were "fundamental differences in faith" within Chinese Christianity. He argued: "Although there are many different theological schools within Christianity, our basic faith remains the same. These differences are nothing more than minor variations within a greater unity—like siblings who may look different yet remain brothers and sisters in essence." This analogy aimed to diminish Wang's emphasis on doctrinal purity by framing diversity within the Three-Self Movement as natural and mutually respectable. Next, Tsui addressed Wang's challenge concerning the vague definition and unclear sources of the so-called "imperialist ideological toxins." Tsui retorted: "Such people have never paid proper attention to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement at all." He claimed that during the "Great Accusation Campaign" and the numerous "study sessions" held nationwide, countless examples of imperialist toxins infiltrating Christian faith had been revealed, with details "continuously exposed in Christian publications." If anyone saw these yet still refused to acknowledge them, Tsui concluded, it could only mean their "hearts are calloused and their ears dull." Tsui then invoked the metaphor of "spiritual health" as the basis of his argument, likening "ideological toxins" to harmful bacteria in the human body—if left untreated, they would damage the integrity of faith. He declared: "To deny the existence of imperialist toxins within the faith and allow them to spread unchecked is also harmful to one's spiritual health." This reasoning worked to legitimize the Three-Self Movement by portraying critics as equivalent to those who deny the presence of disease, thereby casting them as "harmful to spiritual well-being." Finally, Tsui delivered a sharp attack on Wang's accusations that Three-Self leaders lacked doctrinal integrity. He asked pointedly: "What exactly is it that you oppose—the Three-Self Patriotic Movement itself, or this or that individual within the movement? If you believe your faith to be pure, why not join the movement and, by your example, correct the errors of others?" (Tsui 1955, p. 4).

Tsui contended that Wang's criticisms amounted to "using personal attacks as a means to undermine the movement." In his view, Wang's public objections constituted actions that "destroy unity and mislead believers," warranting condemnation on both theological and political grounds.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From a theological perspective, the position represented by H. H. Tsui in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement—that of "minor differences within fundamental unity" and "mutual respect for faith"—appears on the surface to align with certain early traditions of the Church of Christ in China (CCC). However, in essence, it reveals significant tension and transformation. Since its founding in the 1920s, the CCC had

Subsequently, Wang Weifan, a theological student at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, also took up his pen to respond to Wang Mingdao's statements. On May 12, *Tianfeng* published his article, "Though Many, We Are Still One Body," in which Wang Weifan recounted his personal experiences as a counterpoint to Wang Mingdao's critique of so-called "unbelievers" (Wang Weifan May 12, 1955 p. 5, p.9).

Wang Weifan candidly admitted that in his earlier years, he too had been influenced by the idea of "pure faith," which led him to mistakenly view brothers and sisters in the church with different backgrounds or practices as "unbelievers." He even believed that an inevitable "struggle over faith" would arise in the future. However, through years of fellowship, collaboration, and study in various churches and at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, Wang testified that those he had once labeled as "unbelievers" were, in fact, equally devoted to the Lord—pious and sincere in their faith, without any essential theological differences. On this basis, he emphasized: "All who bear the name of Christ are redeemed by the blood of the Lord." For him, the differences within the church were merely "minor variations within a great unity," which should never serve as grounds for division. Rather than hindering unity, these differences could enrich the spiritual life of the church. Regarding Wang Mingdao's notion of "unbelievers," Wang Weifan considered it a judgmental and harmful assertion. He further posed the question: "If someone whose faith was previously lacking has now repented and bears witness to the risen Christ,

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indeed emphasized the spirit of denominational unity and fundamental agreement in faith. At that time, the CCC functioned as a union church, integrating denominations such as the Presbyterian, Congregational, and Methodist traditions, adopting principles like "minor differences within major agreement" and "unity without uniformity." In this sense, Tsui's metaphor— "though ears, eyes, mouth, and nose differ, all are brothers and sisters"—bears formal and linguistic similarity to the CCC's emphasis on unity. Nevertheless, the CCC's original spirit of unity was not built upon political ideology but upon the supreme authority of Scripture, the centrality of Jesus Christ, and an emphasis on individual freedom of conscience. Therefore, even amid differences in liturgy or church governance, there remained a consistent insistence on core tenets of faith, such as the divinity of Christ, the uniqueness of salvation, and the authority of the Bible. While Tsui's viewpoint seemingly echoes the CCC's tradition of unity, it is, in reality, embedded within a framework of political loyalty and ideological filtering. This represents a historical addition that departs from the CCC's early pursuit of "biblical centrality and freedom of faith." The "unity" advocated by Tsui is one that conforms to the prevailing political climate, marginalizing critics by labeling them "unpatriotic" or "sowers of discord"—a stance far removed from the CCC's original gospel-centered position. For further study on the history of the Church of Christ in China, see (Chan 2013).

should we not welcome his return instead of continuing to attack him?" He argued that Wang Mingdao's remarks contradicted the love of Christ and amounted to something close to "malicious slander" (Wang Weifan May 12, 1955, p. 5, p. 9).

This response served both as a rebuttal to Wang Mingdao's "theology of division" and as a defense of the Three-Self Movement. In Wang Weifan's view, the movement had actually helped believers rediscover their fraternal bonds, leading the church toward a healthier and more spiritually enriched future (Wang Weifan May 12, 1955, p. 9).

At this point, Wang Weifan, unlike the two previously mentioned figures, held neither significant ecclesiastical authority nor notable social influence. He was not among the elite of the Three-Self establishment, and his statements—whether theological or political—carried comparatively limited weight. Nevertheless, *Tianfeng's* decision to publish the views of a young student from Nanjing Union Theological Seminary reflected the perspectives and sentiments of ordinary Christians outside the leadership circle. It demonstrated both the diversity within the Three-Self community and certain noteworthy points of consensus. Common to the arguments of all three respondents were two main themes. First, they advocated for unity in faith and opposed drawing rigid doctrinal boundaries. Differences within the Chinese church, they contended, were merely "minor variations" within a "greater unity"; therefore, Wang Mingdao's act of labeling certain Christians as "unbelievers" was deemed unjust and divisive. Second, they framed participation in the Three-Self Movement as a righteous act—an expression of Chinese Christians' patriotic commitment in the context of the new society of the People's Republic. In their view, such involvement was closely tied to the fate of the nation, and any opposition to the movement was interpreted as harboring politically subversive motives and resisting the tide of history. Consequently, they all invoked the principle of "freedom of faith and mutual respect" within the Three-Self framework, asserting that the movement did not require altering the substance of one's beliefs while respecting church traditions and distinctive doctrines. From this standpoint, they rejected the legitimacy of Wang Mingdao's claim to be "defending the faith," portraying it as neither necessary nor justified.

### 3. The Escalating Pressure on Wang Mingdao's Faith

As the written exchanges intensified with *Tianfeng's* continued responses, Wang Mingdao came to be regarded by the Three-Self faction as an obstinate figure. His statements were condemned as "opposing national unity," "serving imperialist interests," and "undermining church unity." During this period, additional figures—such as Bao Zheqing (鲍哲庆), Zhang Guangxu (张

光旭), Chen Jianzhen (陈见真), and Sun Pengxi (孙鹏翥)—joined the chorus of criticism, contributing to an overwhelming wave of denunciations in *Tianfeng* that turned Wang into the prime target of attack within China's religious community (Wang 1997, p. 72).

On the other side, Wang Mingdao's reaction after reading the excerpts of statements by Chen Jianzhen, Sun Pengxi, and others in *Tianfeng* was visceral. He bluntly described these individuals as "despicable and treacherous," expressing deep indignation and revulsion. Undoubtedly, what Wang perceived in these polemics was no longer a mere theological disagreement but a deliberate attempt at defamation and character assassination. This sense of hostility further heightened his concern over the spiritual condition of the church under these circumstances and strengthened his resolve to bear testimony to the faith (Wang April 8, 1955).

By early 1955, Wang Mingdao's sermons at the Beijing Christian Tabernacle increasingly focused on themes of "spiritual warfare" and the preservation of "doctrinal purity." For instance, on January 15, in a message to young believers, he explicitly warned that "godless ideologies and anti-Christian movements both within and outside the church" were advancing on all fronts (Wang January 15, 1955). On February 6, he delivered a sermon sharply criticizing the "corruption and deterioration" of the church, underscoring his deep anxiety over its present condition (Wang February 6, 1955). Two days later, on February 8, during a meeting of the Mary Group at the Tabernacle, Wang preached on "The Martyrdom of Stephen," exhorting believers to stand firm with courage. These examples demonstrate that Wang perceived the growing hostility as an ever more tangible reality—one that weighed heavily upon his sense of responsibility, compelling him to speak with increased urgency and boldness (Wang February 8, 1955).

Beginning in March, Wang Mingdao faced not only mounting conflicts within the church but also direct pressure from state and political authorities. His refusal to sign the "Anti-Atomic Bomb War Declaration" triggered fierce attacks from multiple fronts. The local neighborhood committee seized on this refusal to demand that Wang publicly demonstrate support for government decisions, making his non-cooperation a focal point of scrutiny within his congregation as well (Wang March 28, 1955). Wang's sermons at the Beijing Christian Tabernacle increasingly touched on politically sensitive boundaries. On April 14, for example, he declared that "the second coming of Christ stands in absolute contradiction to the so-called communist society"—a statement that unmistakably drew a clear line between core Christian doctrines and the atheistic ideology of the ruling party (Wang April 14, 1955). Despite being surrounded by unrelenting pressure, Wang felt compelled to remain steadfast in proclaiming the fundamentals of the faith. Each Sunday, the Tabernacle was

filled to capacity, with many believers eagerly embracing his teaching, while others exhibited fear, confusion, or even withdrew altogether. On March 13, he preached a sermon titled "The One Hated by the World," a clear exhortation urging Christians not to waver under duress (Wang March 13, 1955).

Throughout the first half of 1955, Wang repeatedly emphasized themes such as "Do not fear those who kill the body," "Do not be afraid of human threats," "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me," and "Who can thwart the will of God?"—all intended to cultivate in believers a spirit of unshakable faith and courage. At the time, some church members even suggested that his sermons were becoming "too heavily focused on spiritual warfare" and needed moderation. Meanwhile, government authorities were closely monitoring his militant tone, fearing that his words could incite resistance and ultimately invite severe consequences (Wang March 10, 1955).

On the other hand, between March and June, churches in various regions—such as those in Changchun and Hohhot—began withdrawing from the Three-Self Movement under Wang Mingdao's influence. These incidents not only became prime targets for denunciation by Three-Self proponents but also made it clear to Wang that this spiritual battle could no longer be handled quietly (Wang February 16, February 24, and March 2, 1955). By this point, Wang had emerged as the most visible representative of a path outside the Three-Self organizational framework within Chinese Christianity. Although his position remained that of a minority, his public stand increasingly shaped an alternative ecclesial paradigm for others who refused to align with the structures established by the movement.

By the summer of 1955, amid intense public criticism and escalating spiritual conflict, Wang Mingdao began writing what would become his seminal work, *We—For the Sake of Faith*.<sup>2</sup> This text served both as his response to the sharp attacks from the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and as a formal declaration of his theological stance. According to his diary, Wang started conceptualizing the piece and consulting related literature on May 27, and on June 3, he began drafting the essay titled *We—For the Sake of Faith*. He recorded that upon waking in the early hours of that day, he "thought about the matter of the title" and, after prayer, felt a strong sense of affirmation: "I perceive this to be very good; I should harbor no fear in my heart." Although he fully

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2 The present study cites *We—For the Sake of Faith* according to its independently published book edition released by Wang Mingdao in 1955. The text was first published in *Spiritual Food Quarterly*. Wang, Mingdao. 1955. "We—For the Sake of Faith" *Spiritual Food Quarterly* 114 (Summer 1955): 25–34. [王明道〈我們是爲了信仰〉《靈食季刊》冊114(1955年夏): 25-34.] But the book version is followed throughout this article.

understood that this act would be "like placing the handle of the knife into others' hands," Wang nevertheless expressed no hesitation. This detail vividly illustrates the courage with which he faced an increasingly perilous situation (Wang May 27 and June 3, 1955).

Initially, Wang Mingdao had no intention of referencing Wang Weifan's article, but he ultimately concluded that its content was closely related to his theme and decided to include it as one of the objects of response. By June 9, he completed the manuscript—a lengthy piece of approximately 25,000–26,000 characters—which was later published in the June issue of *Spiritual Food Quarterly*. One week after completing the work, on the evening of June 16, Wang publicly read the article for the first time during a training session. He noted that its content was impassioned and its tone earnest, leaving attendees deeply moved. Wang regarded the text with great importance, presenting and explaining it multiple times in subsequent sessions. Shortly after its publication, the article garnered widespread attention and elicited strong reactions. Within just a few months, Christians in many regions had read and circulated the text, prompting renewed reflection on matters of faith and causing a profound stir within the Chinese Christian community. Wang received numerous letters in response—for example, one from Li Gongcheng in Shanghai expressed deep emotion after reading *We—For the Sake of Faith* and recommended publishing it as a standalone volume for wider distribution. That same day, another letter from Lin Xiangao in Guangzhou echoed the suggestion. After discussing the proposal with members of the Beijing Christian Tabernacle, the congregation unanimously recognized the urgent necessity of the work and resolved to publish it as a separate volume, printing an initial run of 5,000 copies (Wang June 9, June 16, June 23, June 27, and June 28, 1955; Wang Mingdao 1955). The book quickly circulated across the country, becoming an essential resource for Chinese Christians seeking to understand why Wang refused to join the Three-Self Movement. Its influence and significance were both immediate and unmistakable, leaving an enduring impact on the church in China.

## II. Wang Mingdao's Critique of Modernist Christianity

Wang Mingdao's composition of *We—For the Sake of Faith* in 1955 was by no means an impulsive reaction or an abstract theoretical exercise. Rather, it was the culmination of prolonged psychological strain, profound challenges, and what he perceived as an unrelenting "spiritual battle." The entire process—from conceptualization and preparatory reading to drafting, public reading, and, finally, the responses from believers that led to its printing—reveals Wang's deep sense of spiritual resolve and pastoral responsibility "in the midst of a storm." Therefore, *We—For the Sake of Faith* should not be

understood merely as an apologetic text; it also offers a critical lens into the distinctive faith identity of churches that chose to remain outside the framework of the Three-Self Movement.

### 1. The Faith Divide Between Fundamentalists and Modernist Christianity

In *We—For the Sake of Faith*, Wang Mingdao declares his central thesis from the outset: this is a battle over the very essence of faith—one that admits no compromise, and which, in his view, had already been fought in the Chinese church for more than thirty years. He frames the controversy within the sharp antithesis between the "Fundamentalist" and "Modernist" conceptions of faith, asserting that this conflict is not unique to China but is a global phenomenon. As Wang states: "For more than thirty years, the Chinese church has likewise faced the irreconcilable conflict between the fundamentalist interpretation of faith and the modernist interpretation. This is not merely a matter of differing interpretations; it is a fundamental opposition between belief and unbelief." (Wang 1955, pp. 25-34) By locating the debate within this wider historical and global framework, Wang presents his position not as a private opinion but as part of a worldwide ecclesial struggle to defend the faith, transforming a seemingly local dispute into a universal apologetic battle for the preservation of Christian truth.

Wang Mingdao's forthright, dichotomous opening reflects a deliberate presupposition and a calculated rhetorical strategy. He asserts that the issue at hand is not an academic debate or a dialogue in the spirit of pluralism, but rather a "conflict of faith." In doing so, he establishes the tone of the discussion and clearly delineates the theological positions of the two opposing camps. Wang underscores that the "Fundamentalist" side upholds the divine inspiration of Scripture and the authenticity of the essential truths of the faith, whereas the "Modernist" side, under the guise of moderation and inclusivity, blurs the very essence of faith and, in essence, betrays it. By articulating his own stance, Wang makes it clear that this is not a neutral comparison of theological perspectives; it is an impassioned argument with a pronounced bias. For this reason, he avoids terms like "differences" or "divergent views" and instead employs words such as "conflict" and "overthrow," portraying the Modernist position as inherently threatening. This rhetorical move heightens the reader's sense of crisis, rendering "watchfulness" and "resistance" as legitimate and necessary responses (Wang 1955, pp. 25-26). By framing the issue as a "struggle between two camps," asserting a binary "either-or" standard of faith, and deploying a call to "oppose the enemy," Wang sets the stage for an atmosphere of militancy—a call to arms to "fight for the truth" that permeates the entire text.

To illustrate the theological position of the modernist, Wang Mingdao



proceeds to dismantle it through a critique of Y. T. Wu's views as articulated in his 1949 essay collection *Darkness and Light*. Wang begins by extensively quoting Wu's description of the five major points of divergence between the fundamentalist and modernist camps.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the view of Scripture, Wang Mingdao notes that Wu's view is:

"The fundamentalists believe that every word and phrase of the Bible is divinely inspired by God and, therefore, contains no error whatsoever. The Modernist, however, employing the methods of Higher Criticism, hold that although the writing of the Bible was prompted by divine revelation, it cannot be interpreted according to its literal wording." (Wang 1955, pp. 26-27)

Wang seizes upon what he perceives as a semantic contradiction in this statement, using it as the starting point for his rebuttal. He asks pointedly: "What kind of reasoning is this? If one claims that the writing of the Bible was due to God's revelation, yet insists that it cannot be interpreted literally, then on what basis should it be interpreted?" (Wang 1955, p. 28)

The crux of Wang's critique is this: if the words of Scripture are divinely inspired, yet are deemed unfit for literal interpretation, does this not imply that God's revelation is unclear or unreliable? Such a contradiction, Wang argues, undermines not only the objectivity of Scripture but also its authority as the foundation of faith. By highlighting this inconsistency, Wang exposes what he considers a fundamental breach in the logical coherence of modernist theology.

On another front, Wang Mingdao issued a strong rebuttal against the modernist acceptance of materialism and their denial of the biblical account of human origins in Genesis. When Y. T. Wu asserted that "the fundamentalists believe that humanity is the result of God's supernatural creation, whereas the modernist accept the theory of evolution, holding that humans developed through natural processes and may even have evolved from apes" (Wang 1955, p. 25). Wang responded with sharp criticism: "Such a statement, in effect, completely overturns the opening chapters of the Bible." He further argued that if Scripture is truly God's revelation, then its account of human origins must carry both authority and factual reliability; otherwise, it does not deserve to be called divine revelation. Wang wrote: "If the first chapters of the Bible are absurd and fictitious—unworthy even of a smile—then how much of the

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<sup>3</sup> Wu Y. T., *Darkness and Light*. This book, consisting of more than 200,000 characters, primarily discusses Wu's views on contemporary Chinese politics, society, and international relations, as well as his understanding of Chinese Christianity and theological thought. It was Wu's perspectives on Christian theology in this work that prompted Wang Mingdao's response. (Wu 1949)

rest of the Bible is not absurd and fictitious, unworthy of a smile? It becomes nearly impossible to decide." (Wang 1955, p. 29) Employing a form of slippery-slope reasoning, Wang contended that denying the historical authenticity of Genesis destabilizes the entire foundation of biblical faith. This critique underscores Wang's unwavering commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture and reveals his fundamental distrust of modernist interpretive methods.

Wang Mingdao's second point of contention concerned the incarnation of Jesus, specifically the doctrine of the virgin birth. Quoting Y. T. Wu, Wang noted: "The Modernist regard the story of Jesus' virgin birth as nothing more than a parable." (Wang 1955, p. 29) This statement provoked an even sharper rebuttal from Wang. From both historical and textual perspectives, he argued that the virgin birth of Jesus is clearly recorded as a historical event in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. To treat it as a parable, he contended, is to deny the authenticity of these biblical texts altogether. Wang pressed the point rhetorically:

"The virgin birth of Jesus is an indisputable fact, yet the Modernist say we should regard it as a parable. Does this not imply that Jesus never existed at all—that ancient writers merely invented a parable for people to admire?" (Wang 1955, p. 29)

Here, Wang employs a strategy of semantic escalation, amplifying the logical implications of the modernist position to render it absurd and untenable, even equating it with the fabrication of fictional religious myths.

Going further, Wang Mingdao advanced a theological argument that underscored the intrinsic connection between the virgin birth and the doctrine of the Incarnation. He wrote: "We believe that the relationship between these two matters is extremely close and absolutely necessary. If He is the 'word made flesh,' then He must have been born of a virgin. We are not the 'Word made flesh,' because we are born of a father and a mother." (Wang 1955, p. 29) Here, Wang invokes a Christological principle rooted in the early ecumenical councils: that only through virgin birth could Jesus, in assuming human flesh, retain His divine nature. Since His origin did not involve human sexual union but was solely an act of God, the virgin birth guaranteed His uniqueness as God incarnate. To deny this event, Wang contended, is to deny the very mode of Christ's divine entry into the world—thus stripping the doctrine of the Incarnation of its uniqueness and dismantling the theological foundation of soteriology. As he argued: "If the 'Word made flesh' must still be born of a father and a mother, then every person in the world could claim to be the 'Word made flesh.' In that case, why believe exclusively that Jesus is the 'Word

made flesh'?" (Wang 1955, p. 29) In Wang's exposition, this is more than a theological assertion; it is also a rhetorical strategy aimed at exposing the perceived absurdity of the modernist interpretive approach.

Wang Mingdao next addressed Y. T. Wu's third and fourth points of divergence, which concerned the doctrines of atonement and resurrection. Wu argued that fundamentalists believe Jesus' death on the cross was an expiatory sacrifice that turned away God's wrath and secured forgiveness for humanity—a belief he characterized as "a basic tenet of the seventeenth-century religious revolution." In contrast, the modernist position regarded the cross primarily as a manifestation of God's love, intended to draw people into union with Him, without requiring belief in divine wrath or a substitutionary atonement (Wang 1955, pp. 29-30). In response, Wang underscored what he considered the core biblical doctrine: that human sin results in separation from God, and that only through the atoning death of Jesus Christ can sinners receive forgiveness, justification, sanctification, regeneration, and eternal life. He declared that if the modernist interpretation were true, then: "The gospel of Christ could no longer be called good news at all, but nothing more than a deceitful lie." (Wang 1955, p. 30)

Wang Mingdao then turned to Scripture to demonstrate that Jesus' death was indeed an act of atonement. He cited passages such as Matthew 20:28: "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many," and Matthew 26:27–28, where Jesus declares: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Through these texts, Wang emphasized that Christ's death was not merely an expression of divine love, but a concrete redemptive act. To deny this truth, he argued, would be tantamount to: "Overturning the Old Testament, overturning the New Testament, and overturning the entire gospel." (Wang 1955, p. 30) Wang further asserted that the modernist Christianity advocacy of the "social gospel" arose precisely because of its rejection of Jesus' redemptive work. In his view, without the belief in Christ's substitutionary atonement, the core of Christianity is hollowed out, reducing the faith to nothing more than a system of ethics or a mere social movement (Wang 1955, p. 30).

On the question of the resurrection, Y. T. Wu argued that the Apostles' Creed affirms, "I believe in the resurrection of the body," but claimed that this reflected the views of third-century Christians who, "much like the Egyptians," thought that without bodily resurrection, spiritual resurrection would be impossible. According to Wu, fundamentalists insist on the necessity of Jesus' bodily resurrection—without which He could not have conquered death—whereas Modernist contend that the resurrection need not be physical, asserting that "even Paul himself believed only in a spiritual resurrection"

(Wang 1955, p. 30). Wang Mingdao launched a vigorous rebuttal against these claims.

He criticized the modernist for failing to ground their discussion of the resurrection in Scripture, choosing instead to focus on the *Apostles' Creed* and the beliefs of third-century Christians—going so far as to draw comparisons with Egyptian culture. Wang argued that such an approach obscures biblical truth, shifting the foundation of faith from divine revelation to human historical opinion. Wang emphasized that Scripture clearly testifies to Jesus' bodily resurrection, not merely a spiritual one. He cited John 20:4–8, which describes how Jesus' body left the tomb, leaving behind the head cloth and linen wrappings. He also referenced Acts 1:3, which states that after His resurrection Jesus presented Himself alive "with many convincing proofs" and spent forty days with His disciples. In addition, he pointed to Luke 24:41–43, where the risen Jesus ate broiled fish in the presence of His disciples—evidence, Wang insisted, that He was no mere spiritual being (Wang 1955, pp. 30–31).

In response to the claim that "Paul himself believed only in a spiritual resurrection," Wang Mingdao directly cited 1 Corinthians 15:1–8, where Paul clearly affirms the bodily resurrection of Christ and lists eyewitnesses who saw Him after He rose: Cephas, the Twelve, more than five hundred brothers, James, and finally Paul himself. Wang questioned how the modernist could possibly conclude from Scripture that Paul denied bodily resurrection, branding such an interpretation as nothing less than "fabricating lies and bearing false witness" (Wang 1955, pp. 31–32). Wang then turned to 1 Corinthians 15:12–28, stressing that to deny bodily resurrection is to dismantle the entire Christian faith. He highlighted verse 17 in particular: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins." This, Wang argued, demonstrates that bodily resurrection is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. To reject it is to render the entire structure of belief meaningless. Consequently, he characterized the modernist Christianity view as "shocking and appalling" and openly questioned whether those who held such a position could still rightly be called Christians (Wang 1955, pp. 32–33).

Finally, Wang Mingdao addressed Y. T. Wu's explanation of the divergence between fundamentalists and modernist regarding the doctrine of Christ's second coming. Wu stated: "The final point of contention between the two camps concerns the return of Jesus. Like Paul and the early Christians, the fundamentalists believe that Jesus will soon descend again in the flesh, coming with the clouds. The modernist, however, regard the notion of Christ's return as merely a poetic symbol—representing the triumph of justice over evil. They believe that the progress of the world results from gradual evolution, not from a dramatic upheaval such as the eschatological expectation found in the

Hebrew messianic view of history." (Wang 1955, p. 33) In this description, Wu contrasts the fundamentalist conviction that Christ's return is an imminent, concrete event with the modernist interpretation of it as a symbolic concept signifying the eventual triumph of righteousness over sin. This latter view carries implicit overtones of historical evolutionism, suggesting that Christian faith must keep pace with the modern spirit of progress rather than remain bound to traditional, supernatural hopes.

Wang Mingdao responded pointedly: "Since the modernist Christianity themselves acknowledge that 'like Paul and the early Christians, the fundamentalists believe Jesus will soon return in the flesh, coming with the clouds,' it is evident that they are fully aware this is a central doctrine held in common by true Christians from the apostles to the present day. Yet they choose to deny this precious faith." (Wang 1955, p. 33) Wang's emphasis here is that belief in Christ's second coming is not a peculiar notion belonging to a specific era or group of Christians; rather, it is an enduring tenet of the faith, transmitted from the apostolic age to the present. Thus, he argues, the modernist position is not merely an alternative theological opinion but fundamentally opposed to the historic faith of Christianity. Moreover, Wang underscores that the promise of Christ's return permeates the entire scope of Scripture—from the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, to the words of Jesus Himself, and to the apostolic epistles. In other words, to reject the doctrine of Christ's return is to reject the authority of the whole Bible, thereby undermining the very foundation of Christian belief (Wang 1955, p. 33).

In addition, Wang Mingdao appealed to the lived experience and historical testimony of Christians to underscore the significance of belief in Christ's second coming. He wrote: "This is the hope and glory of Christians; it is their comfort and joy. It is this promise that enabled the apostles to fear neither imprisonment, nor beatings, nor death, but to proclaim the gospel with courage. It is this promise that led the saints of old to walk to the execution grounds singing hymns of praise—meeting death heroically and without fear." (Wang 1955, pp. 33-34) Here, Wang links the doctrine of Christ's return with the spirit of martyrdom, arguing that this hope empowered generations of Christians to remain unshaken in the face of persecution and death. For Wang, Christ's return is not merely a poetic symbol of "justice triumphing over evil," as modernist claim, but a concrete and certain future event—a decisive moment securing the ultimate victory of believers (Wang 1955, p. 34).

After affirming the reality of Christ's return, Wang Mingdao issued a severe denunciation of the modern Christianity position. He wrote: "Such an essential truth is dismissed by the modern Christianity with the phrase 'a poetic symbol.' This is yet another appalling and outrageous lie! Can you still acknowledge such people as Christians?" Through this statement, Wang

expressed his indignation at reducing the second coming of Christ to mere symbolism—something he regarded as tantamount to a total denial of the doctrine. Employing a series of rhetorical questions—"What do they have left?"—he conveyed his unrestrained opposition, concluding that modern Christianity had completely deviated from the core of the Christian faith (Wang 1955, p. 34).

Wang Mingdao continued his critique of Y. T. Wu by highlighting the practical influence of modernist theology within the Chinese church. He explicitly named works such as Chao Tzu Ch'en's(趙紫宸) *The Life of Jesus*,<sup>4</sup>

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4 T. C. Chao completed *The Life of Jesus* in 1935, the first biography of Jesus written by a Chinese author. The book is elegantly written, with a grand design, employing a great deal of imagination and subjective interpretation. Through his unique understanding and creative approach, Chao reconstructs the image of Jesus found in the Gospels. Based on what he called "an understanding of Jesus through the heart," Chao uses methods of empathy and intuition to synthesize the accounts in the Gospels, presenting an image of Jesus as a person of clear character, lofty ideals, and relevance to the needs of the times. In Chao's portrayal, Jesus is no longer the Christ of theological tradition—both fully divine and fully human—but rather a patriotic youth with a spirit of sacrifice and universal love, a saint in suffering, and a revolutionary leader, echoing China's deep yearning for national salvation and moral renewal. *The Life of Jesus* is not only a work with profound theological background but also an attempt of significant literary value and historical meaning. Chao presents Jesus in a culturally adapted manner, depicting his character in language and thought accessible to Chinese readers, aiming to realize the contemporary ideal of "saving China through Christianity." However, Chao was deeply influenced by modernist theology in his early years, adopting symbolic or rationalized interpretations of biblical accounts of miracles, the virgin birth, and the resurrection—sometimes entirely removing divine attributes and interpreting Jesus' life purely from a human perspective. This humanistic interpretive approach, though widely praised in intellectual circles and successful in attracting the attention of non-Christian readers, was seen by fundamentalists as a deconstruction and betrayal of the authority of biblical revelation. For this reason, Wang Mingdao could not accept such modernist works. He regarded *The Life of Jesus* as essentially a literary fabrication, reducing Jesus from the only begotten Son of God to a national moral exemplar, contradicting the Bible's clear revelation of Christ's divinity, atonement, and second coming. Therefore, in *We—For the Sake of Faith*, Wang sharply criticized such works as distortions of truth, viewing them as evidence that modernist, under the guise of faith, were in fact spreading unbelief. As scholar Pan Guohua has noted, Chao's denial of Jesus' miracles did not mean a total devaluation of Jesus; his research emphasized that the true miracle was the transformation of character and that Jesus' greatest contribution lay in his exemplary personality. Nevertheless, from a fundamentalist perspective, stripping Jesus of divinity and reconstructing him with literary techniques renders such a portrayal unacceptable

translations of Harry E. Fosdick's writings,<sup>5</sup> and publications from the Shanghai YMCA Press as key representatives and channels for disseminating modernist thought (Wang 1955, p. 34). In Wang's view, these were not mere theological differences but marked a fundamental divide between "faith and unbelief." He went so far as to argue that such individuals were not "Christians with divergent opinions" but rather "disguised pagans"—the "unbelieving faction" within the church, "wolves in sheep's clothing." (Wang 1955, p. 35) Consequently, Wang insisted not only on refusing any form of union with the modernist but also on the necessity of exposing and resisting them decisively. This uncompromising language reveals Wang's self-understanding: his militancy stemmed from a conscious sense of responsibility to defend the purity of the faith.

In *We—For the Sake of Faith*, Wang Mingdao made it unmistakably clear that his opposition to the "modernist" faction was neither a momentary reaction driven by emotion nor a newly formed position. Rather, it was a theological stance he had steadfastly maintained for three decades, attested by his long record of debates and polemical writings. As he declared:

"For thirty years I have continually spoken and written, warning the church to beware of the unbelieving faction, to resist them, to separate from them. I have

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as a basis for faith, whether theologically or ecclesiastically. Wang's critique was thus rooted in his commitment to preserving doctrinal purity and the authority of Scripture. See Pan 2012; Chu 2025, pp. 172–181.

- 5 Harry Emerson Fosdick (May 24, 1878–October 5, 1969) was a renowned modernist pastor in the United States. In 1903, he was ordained as a Baptist minister at Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City. Fosdick is best known for his central role in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy within American Protestantism during the 1920s and 1930s. He advocated integrating Christian faith with modern science and historical research, opposing a literalist interpretation of the Bible. On May 21, 1922, he delivered his famous sermon, "*Shall the Fundamentalists Win?*" at the First Presbyterian Church in New York City, defending the modernist position and emphasizing that Christian faith should adapt to contemporary knowledge. Consequently, Fosdick is regarded as one of the leading figures of modernist theology. He stressed the importance of religious experience, arguing that Christian faith must continually evolve with the times to accommodate new scientific and social discoveries. Fosdick supported the historical-critical method of biblical study and promoted the Social Gospel movement, emphasizing Christianity's role in social justice and moral reform. He was a prolific writer, publishing nearly 50 books, some of which were translated into multiple languages. Several of his works were translated into Chinese and published by the YMCA Press, significantly influencing Chinese modernist thought. These include *The Meaning of Prayer* (1915), *The Manhood of the Master* (1913), *The Meaning of Faith* (1917), and *The Meaning of Service* (1920).

warned the church never to associate with them, never to unite with them... I cannot stand by and watch these people corrupt the Lord's true way and ruin God's church. I will risk everything to fight them. I have fought them for thirty years, and if my Lord still does not return, I will, by the power of His resurrection, continue to fight them." (Wang 1955, p. 34)<sup>1</sup>

He explained that through both preaching and writing he had "continually" warned the church—demonstrating persistent vigilance and deep engagement on this issue—so much so that he was willing to "risk everything" to fight against modernist. If the Lord did not return soon, he declared, he would "continue to fight by the power of His resurrection." This affirmed that his position was not based on personal preference or emotion but on unwavering loyalty to biblical truth and the essence of the gospel. It is evident that Wang Mingdao did not regard modernist as merely a divergent theological perspective; rather, he viewed it as a hostile force against the true faith. For Wang, the issue involved a stark distinction between truth and falsehood, imposing upon him the responsibility to "expose the false and uphold the true." This conviction defined his identity and practice as a fundamentalist pastor, framing his struggle as an uncompromising defense of orthodoxy against what he perceived as the infiltration of unbelief.

## 2. Faith Cannot Be Compromised: Refuting "Unionism" and False Unity

In *We—For the Sake of Faith*, Wang Mingdao mounts a direct theological rebuttal to an article by H. H. Tsui in *Tianfeng*. He first cites Tsui's claim that although there are many theological schools within Christianity, "our basic faith is essentially the same; the differences are only 'minor variations within a great unity,'" and that Christians should therefore "mutually respect one another's faith." Wang then challenges this with a series of pointed questions and deductions. As General Secretary of the National Christian Council of China, Wang argues, Tsui could not be ignorant of the deep doctrinal divide between fundamentalism and modernist. Yet Tsui still speaks of a shared "basic faith" across all factions. For Wang, this implies one of two possibilities: either Tsui is consciously obscuring the boundaries of true faith, or he lacks even a basic grasp of the widely recognized antagonism between fundamentalist and modernist positions in both the global and Chinese church. In either case, Wang concludes, Tsui's stance is intolerable (Wang 1955, pp. 35-36).

Next, Wang Mingdao contrasted H. H. Tsui's position with Y. T. Wu's candid acknowledgment of his modernist stance. Wang observed that, although Wu rejected essential doctrines such as the virgin birth, resurrection, and second coming, he at least stated openly that he could not accept



traditional theology. Wu did not claim that the differences between modernist and fundamentalists were "minor"; instead, he admitted plainly that "what modernist seeks to oppose is fundamentalism," and that the two camps were divided on five core doctrines. By highlighting this contrast, Wang used Wu's "honest unbelief" as a foil to expose Tsui's "disguised ambiguity." In Wang's judgment, Tsui attempted to blur theological boundaries with rhetoric about "minor differences within a greater unity," thereby obscuring the profound doctrinal gulf between the two positions. Such language, Wang contended, was not only theologically misleading but also lacking in integrity regarding matters of faith (Wang 1955, pp. 36-37).

For Wang, the relationship between fundamentalism and modernist was not a case of "broad agreement with slight differences" but an irreconcilable contradiction—"as incompatible as ice and fire." Denial of the core tenets of faith, he argued, could never be excused under the guise of "respecting diversity" or "tolerating differing opinions." If Christ's deity, atonement, resurrection, and second coming are rejected, then the entire edifice of Christian faith collapses. This, Wang insisted, was not merely a theological nuance but a total disintegration of belief. Thus, Wang stressed emphatically that only by standing firmly upon the truth of Scripture and exposing the mask of false faith could one truly fulfill the responsibility of safeguarding the church (Wang 1955, pp. 36-37).

Furthermore, Wang Mingdao devoted a substantial portion of *We—For the Sake of Faith* to a strong and detailed rebuttal of K. H. Ting's statements in *Tianfeng*. He cited Ting's call for "unity," particularly the remarks: "Imperialism is exploiting Christianity," and "At a time when the entire nation expects us Christians to strengthen our unity in opposing the schemes of imperialism, we find a few individuals engaged in creating division." (Wang 1955, pp. 37-38) Wang responded with uncompromising severity, denouncing such rhetoric as a malicious attempt to politicize and moralize doctrinal differences, branding it an act of "insidious intent" and "vicious slander." He wrote:

"He charges head-on, linking 'the intensified aggression of imperialism' with 'the intensified exploitation of Christianity by imperialism,' and pins both on those who, for the sake of preserving the purity of faith, refuse to cooperate with the 'unbelieving faction.' 'A few individuals are creating division'? Was this division manufactured? Did it begin just now? Twenty-five years ago, I raised my voice in warning, urging true believers to separate themselves from the unbelieving faction." (Wang 1955, p. 39)

Undoubtedly, Wang Mingdao believed that K. H. Ting's reduction of profound doctrinal differences to a mere issue of unity versus division was, in

essence, an attempt to obscure the theological deviations of the modernist camp.

In his response strategy, Wang Mingdao adopted a threefold line of argumentation: First, historical retrospection. Wang traced his opposition to modernist back to the 1930s, citing numerous articles he had written—such as *"Unity or Separation?"* (*He Yi Ne? Fen Li Ne?*), *"Beware of False Teachers"* (*Jin Fang Jia Shi Fu*), and *"A Solemn Warning to Today's Church"* (*Gei Jin Ri Jiao Hui De Yi Ge Yan Zhong De Jing Gao*). These references demonstrated that his insistence on guarding the purity of biblical faith was consistent over decades, rather than an impulsive or ignorant act of a so-called "divider." On the question of unity, Wang argued that Christian unity must rest on a shared commitment to the truth, not on institutional slogans or superficial human arrangements. To cooperate with those who deny the essential truths of the faith, he insisted, is not an act of love but a betrayal of the gospel. For this reason, Wang categorically rejected K. H. Ting's vision of unity, describing it as a doctrinally vacuous concept and, in practice, a form of compromise with unbelief (Wang 1955, pp. 39-41).

Second, scriptural appeal. Wang invoked biblical texts, including 2 John and Pauline epistles, to assert that fidelity to truth requires a clear stand on core doctrines. Believers must not work together with or maintain fellowship with those who propagate heresy or deny fundamental tenets of the faith, lest they "share in their wicked works" (Wang 1955, p. 42).

Third, empirical evidence. Wang provided concrete examples of how the "unbelieving faction" had, through theological education, undermined the faith of young believers. He further cited cases in which cooperation with modernist had facilitated spiritual decay and the erosion of biblical truth within the church (Wang 1955, p. 42). Through this layered approach—historical continuity, biblical mandate, and practical consequences—Wang framed his rejection of so-called "unity" as a non-negotiable demand of faithfulness to Christ.

He then proceeded to dismantle, sentence by sentence, Ting's statements in *Tianfeng* concerning "division," "unity," and "differences of faith." Wang mounted a firm defense against Ting's attempt to attribute internal theological disputes within the church to "imperialist manipulation" and "political motives." Quoting Ting's opening rhetorical question, "Just when imperialism wants us to be divided, we find ourselves divided; how do we explain this?" Wang immediately countered that such language was a calculated use of ambiguity, designed to insinuate that those who separate from the "unbelieving faction" are tools of imperialism. This tactic, Wang argued, plants suspicion in the minds of readers without presenting any concrete evidence, leaving the accused defenseless while allowing the accuser to avoid

accountability (Wang 1955, p. 43).

Wang Mingdao once again referenced Y. T. Wu's own writings, which acknowledged the long-standing global conflict between fundamentalists and modernists, including the well-known church controversies in the United States in 1922. Wang stressed that such doctrinal struggles were never the result of "imperialist" schemes but arose from a commitment to defend the truth—an essential act of resistance against heresy within the household of God. He then posed a sharp rhetorical question to K. H. Ting: "Are we to conclude, then, that the saints who, throughout the ages, fought for the truth and even laid down their lives as martyrs were all tools of imperialism? Such a claim is nothing less than an erasure of the history of faith and an insult to the memory of the martyrs." (Wang 1955, p. 43)

When K. H. Ting asserted that "our faith is essentially the same" and that doctrinal differences amounted to "minor variations within a greater unity," Wang Mingdao countered that such claims distorted reality. He argued that the fundamentalist and modernist camps diverged on the most essential truths of the faith, a divergence so profound that it constituted, in his words, "a difference of grave consequence." This, he maintained, was the true basis for separation. Wang expressed confidence that Ting, as the president of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, could not be ignorant of the deep rift between modernist and fundamentalism. If Ting genuinely doubted that the division was about matters of faith, Wang insisted, he should have plainly identified what he meant by the so-called "serious reason" for separation, rather than resorting to ambiguity and insinuating ulterior motives. Wang stated bluntly: "Mr. Ting has not 'exaggerated the differences of faith'; rather, he has obliterated them. He erases the differences of faith for the obvious purpose of making others believe that those who refuse to unite for the sake of faith are not motivated by faith at all but are being used by imperialism—thus attaching a political stigma to them." (Wang 1955, pp. 44-45)

In sharp contrast, Wang stressed that the so-called "unbelieving faction" was not a fictitious label but a precise designation based on their public denial of fundamental biblical doctrines. This was not an issue that could be glossed over under the guise of "diversity of faith." He candidly affirmed that his refusal to seek "unity" was grounded solely in these irreconcilable differences over matters essential to the Christian faith (Wang 1955, p. 45).

Because K. H. Ting argued that Christians should unite on the grounds that "we believe in the same Heavenly Father, the same Bible, share in the same redemption of Christ, and are guided by the same Holy Spirit," he sought to minimize internal doctrinal disputes and emphasize the "commonality" of faith over its "differences." However, Wang Mingdao contended that such rhetoric, though outwardly conciliatory and inclusive, in

reality concealed a profound departure from the truth of the faith (Wang 1955, p. 46). Wang reiterated that modernist fundamentally reject the Bible's teaching on creation, the virgin birth, Christ's atoning death, bodily resurrection, and His second coming. These are not minor or negotiable points of theology but the very foundation of the Christian faith. Therefore, if modernist deny these essential doctrines, to claim that they "believe in the same Bible" is contrary to fact; to assert that they "share in the same redemption of Christ" is meaningless, for they reject the necessity of redemption altogether; and to speak of being "guided by the same Holy Spirit" is impossible, since the Holy Spirit was sent on the basis of Christ's resurrection—a truth they deny. For Wang, such appeals to superficial consensus cannot produce true unity in the essence of faith (Wang 1955, pp. 46-47).

In response to K. H. Ting's accusation that some people were "arbitrarily labeling others as members of the 'unbelieving faction,'" even claiming that such actions amounted to "cursing others," Wang Mingdao issued a firm rebuttal. He reiterated that the term "unbelieving faction" was not a subjective insult but an objective designation for those who denied the essential truths of Scripture. Wang pointed out that as early as 1929 he had employed this term to describe individuals who rejected the core doctrines of the Christian faith. In his sermons and writings, he consistently distinguished between "differences within the faith" and the outright "absence of faith." For Wang, modernist were not merely holding divergent opinions on secondary matters; they fundamentally denied or redefined the gospel itself. Therefore, his use of terms like "false brothers" and "unbelieving faction" aligned with biblical language and theological precision, rather than constituting reckless name-calling (Wang 1955, p. 47).

Overall, Wang's response to Ting underscored his conviction that the present divisions within the church did not stem from politics or external provocations but were the inevitable result of internal doctrinal corruption. In the text, Wang issued an urgent call for believers to discern the true gospel from falsehood, to seek unity only with genuine followers of Christ, and to draw a clear boundary from false teachers and those who oppose the truth. Clearly, his rebuttal was not merely a critique of K. H. Ting as an individual but a comprehensive response to the broader trend of "covering up fundamental theological differences under the guise of love and unity."

Indeed, because Wang Weifan's article aligned with K. H. Ting's emphasis on doctrinal "commonality" as the basis for unity within the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, Wang Mingdao responded sharply in *We—For the Sake of Faith*. He argued that such an attitude—appearing harmonious yet in reality blurring the truth—posed a grave threat to the integrity of the Christian

faith (Wang Mingdao 1955, p. 50). Specifically, Wang Mingdao challenged Wang Weifan's assertion that the term "unbelieving faction" was merely a construct "fabricated in my mind." He countered that the divide between fundamentalists and modernist was well documented in both Chinese and global church history, and even acknowledged institutionally within Nanjing Union Theological Seminary itself. To prove this, Wang cited records from the seminary's official journal, *The Journal of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary*, which explicitly stated that the school implemented a "split-class system" to separately teach modernist and fundamentalist theological perspectives. Such evidence, Wang Mingdao argued, demonstrated that these differences were not imaginary but formally recognized at an institutional level. By highlighting this, Wang Mingdao underscored that Wang Weifan's claim was not only blind to historical and present realities but also indicative of a compromised and confused faith perspective—an example of how modernist thinking had eroded theological clarity (Wang Mingdao 1955, pp. 50-51).

For this reason, Wang Mingdao launched a sharp critique of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary for structuring its curriculum to allow "fundamentalist" and "modernist" views to coexist and be taught in parallel. He regarded this approach as an embodiment of religious relativism—tantamount to deliberately sustaining a state in which heresy and truth coexist within theological education. Wang remarked that such a split-class system "amply demonstrates the vast gulf that separates these two positions!" What appeared to be "mutual respect and academic freedom," he argued, was in reality a façade—a means of legitimizing and institutionalizing unbelief under the banner of theological education, thereby corrupting the faith under the guise of scholarly liberty (Wang Mingdao 1955, p. 52).

Secondly, Wang Mingdao rebuked Wang Weifan for trivializing the fundamental differences between biblical faith and modernist theology by describing them as "minor variations within a greater unity." Wang argued that this was not only a profound misunderstanding of the essence of Christian faith but also a denial of the coherence of Scripture itself. He posed a pointed rhetorical question: "If one side believes that man was created by God, while the other claims man evolved from apes; if one side believes in the virgin birth, atonement, bodily resurrection, and second coming of Christ, while the other categorically denies them—how can such differences be reduced to mere 'minor variations'?" Wang Mingdao declared bluntly that the propagation of such a view would ultimately "obliterate the Christian faith altogether" (Wang Mingdao 1955, pp. 51-52).

Additionally, Wang Mingdao observed that Wang Weifan's article perpetuated the same line of reasoning found in the writings of K. H. Ting and H. H. Tsui—namely, employing biblical language such as "unity" and

"brotherly harmony" to cloak what was, in reality, a compromise and distortion of truth. Wang regarded this approach as profoundly dangerous, for it not only concealed the essential distinction between faith and unbelief but also misled believers into thinking that everything within the church could be tolerated, ultimately resulting in the abandonment of the gospel's integrity (Wang Mingdao 1955, pp. 51-52). Thus, Wang's response to Wang Weifan was more than a rebuttal to a personal testimony; it was a decisive counterattack against the rising trend of theological syncretism in his day. He articulated a core conviction with clarity: the unity of the church cannot be built upon blurred truths or the dilution of essential differences, but must be grounded in a shared commitment to biblical revelation and the fundamental definitions of the gospel.

In Wang Mingdao's argumentation, several central themes are unmistakable: he refused to endorse the "unity" promoted by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and instead fought for the confession of fundamentalist. For him, this struggle reflected a pastoral concern for the church that far surpassed any consideration of personal safety; it was an uncompromising defense of what he regarded as the purity of Christian belief. As he declared in the closing passages of *We—For the Sake of Faith*, Wang employed resolute and impassioned language to repudiate and counter the modernist conception of unity. He made it clear that the oft-repeated slogans of "minor differences within a great unity" and "principles of solidarity" were not genuinely concerned with the unity of faith. Rather, they functioned as strategic rhetoric employed by modernist to suppress and neutralize those committed to the integrity of biblical truth. Drawing a parallel to Jesus standing before the political authority of Pilate, falsely accused by the Jewish leaders, Wang underscored his confidence that such charges and schemes against him could never triumph over the truth. He refused to allow the issue of doctrinal division to be trivialized as a mere "excuse for disunity," nor would he permit the formalistic unity advocated by the Three-Self Movement to override the foundational truths of the Christian faith. (Wang 1955, p. 53)

Finally, Wang Mingdao solemnly declared in the text that he not only refused to unite with the "unbelieving faction," but also did not advocate any organizational union with them, even when in fellowship with true believers. For Wang, such alliances lacked any biblical warrant. This reveals his understanding of church unity as being rooted in a shared spiritual faith rather than in institutional or structural integration. At the same time, Wang affirmed that in order to remain faithful to God, he was willing to endure misrepresentation, slander, and persecution, paying any price without compromise—because what he defended was not a matter of personal grievance, but the integrity of the gospel itself. He recognized that, given the

political and social climate of the time, his stance would invite intense pressure and misunderstanding; nevertheless, he emphasized that his battle was not for himself, but, as he concluded emphatically: *We—For the Sake of Faith!* (Wang 1955, p. 53)

In this sense, *We—For the Sake of Faith* served both as Wang Mingdao's personal apologia and as a clarion call to the Chinese church, urging believers to make a decisive choice for faith amid the sweeping tide of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

### III. From Theological Controversy to Political Labeling: The Three-Self Movement's Response Strategy Toward Wang Mingdao

Following the publication of *We—For the Sake of Faith*, the tension between Wang Mingdao, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, and the government quickly escalated into open confrontation ("Strengthen Unity and Clarify Right and Wrong" 1955, pp. 3–5; "Churches in Xi'an Hold Forum..." 1955, p. 7; Qin 1955, pp. 8–12; Ding 1955, p. 13; Jiang 1955, p. 14; Wang 1955, p. 15–16; Sun 1955, pp. 12–13; Zhu 1955, p. 14; Yu 1955, pp. 15–16; Yeh 1955, pp. 17–19; Wu 1955, p. 20; "Criticizing Wrong Words and Actions..." 1955, p. 21; "Short Commentary—Exposing..." 1955, p. 5; Tian Feng Editorial Office 1955, pp. 1–13; Tsui 1955, p. 14; Ting 1955, pp. 16–20; "Churches in Shenyang Criticize..." 1955, p. 21). *Tianfeng* soon carried a series of sharply critical articles by figures such as Wang Weifan, H. H. Tsui, K. H. Ting, and T. C. Chao—many of whom Wang had named in his text. These responses not only sought to refute his arguments but also to marginalize him within the Christian community. The dispute soon acquired an explicitly political character when the Chinese Communist Party labeled his stance part of the "counter-revolutionary clique of Wang Mingdao," framing his theological resistance as a political crime and leading to his arrest and imprisonment. This raises a crucial question: how did the public rhetoric of Three-Self leaders reflect their strategy in responding to *We—For the Sake of Faith*? Their discourse reveals a deliberate effort to recast a doctrinal controversy as a political accusation, portraying Wang not as a defender of orthodoxy but as a threat to national unity and socialist reconstruction.

#### 1. The Nature of the Theological Debate and Its Political Turn

The first major rebuttal came from Wang Weifan in his article "Is It Really for the Sake of Faith?" published in *Tianfeng*. Written in an almost accusatory tone, it forcefully contested Wang Mingdao's criticisms in *We—For the Sake of Faith*, particularly those aimed at his personal testimony and at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. Responding to Wang Mingdao's doubts about his faith

journey, Wang Weifan reaffirmed that during his three years at the seminary, he had "never encountered the so-called 'unbelieving faction' fabricated in the past." This, he insisted, was a matter of personal experience and thus beyond dispute. He posed the rhetorical question: "If someone who has lived at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary for nearly three years testifies that during this time he never encountered any so-called 'unbelieving faction,' what is so 'astonishing' about that?" Wang Weifan accused Wang Mingdao of basing his criticism on mere subjective speculation and even charged him with misrepresenting *The Journal of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary* by quoting out of context, deliberately omitting its emphasis on the shared foundation of faith expressed in "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God" (Wang Weifan July 21, 1955, p. 15). Furthermore, Wang dismissed Wang Mingdao's portrayal of "minor differences within a greater unity" as a threat to doctrinal purity as nothing more than alarmism. With biting irony, he asked: "How can the 'minor differences' under the umbrella of a 'greater unity' possibly annihilate the Christian faith?" To reinforce his point, he cited the coexistence of Paul, Peter, and Apollos in the New Testament church as evidence that theological diversity had always existed within Christianity and was, in fact, a sign of the richness of the faith (Wang Weifan July 21, 1955, p. 16).

Wang Weifan argued that Wang Mingdao's definition and labeling of the so-called "unbelieving faction" was essentially a pretext to justify his rejection of "any form of organizational union." Citing Wang's own statement from *We—For the Sake of Faith*—"Even with all who truly believe in the Lord and faithfully serve God, there can only be unity in the Spirit, but there should be no organizational union of any kind"—Wang Weifan contended that Wang Mingdao's ultimate objective was not merely a theological dispute but a categorical opposition to any church union or participation in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. He wrote bluntly: "This is no longer a matter of faith at all... The issue is quite simple. Mr. Wang's 'solemn declaration' is nothing more than a veiled appeal—an appeal to believers not to join the great anti-imperialist patriotic unity, not to participate in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement" (Wang Weifan July 21, 1955, p. 16).

Wang Weifan further escalated the charge by framing Wang Mingdao's position as hostility toward New China: "Highlighting the so-called faith issue serves only to make the unity of believers more difficult," he claimed, dismissing Wang's insistence on faith as a mere "pretext" or "excuse," the real aim being to undermine unity. He posed the pointed question: "Is Mr. Wang truly acting for the sake of faith?" In doing so, Wang Weifan insinuated that Wang Mingdao's words and actions were essentially a political maneuver to defend an imperialist position (Wang Weifan July 21, 1955, p. 16). Clearly, this article shifted the portrayal of Wang from a principled defender of faith to an



agitator opposing the "anti-imperialist patriotic cause." His claim to "fight for the faith" was reframed as a deliberate tactic to sabotage unity, incite division, and, by implication, serve the agenda of anti-Communist and anti-people forces.

Later, on August 15, *Tianfeng* published H. H. Tsui's article titled "The Disguise of 'Faith' Cannot Deceive Anyone." Written in an overtly confrontational tone, the piece directly targeted Wang Mingdao's *We—For the Sake of Faith*. Tsui categorically denied that the differences between fundamentalists and modernist represented an essential theological divide. Instead, he reiterated the notion of "minor differences within a greater unity," citing over two decades of cooperation within the Chinese Church as evidence against Wang's claim that his critique of modernist was based on doctrinal necessity (Tsui 1955, p. 14).

In Tsui's view, "Wang Mingdao has labeled all co-workers participating in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement as 'unbelievers' and expressed an intense sense of hatred," asserting that Wang's true aim was to use the banner of doctrinal purity as a pretext to sow division—"shifting attention" and "sabotaging the patriotic movement" (Tsui 1955, p. 14). Tsui's rhetoric did more than question Wang's motives; it repeatedly accused Wang of "gnashing his teeth in hatred toward New China," of "lawlessly attacking responsible church leaders," and of "spreading venomous slanders against the government and the Three-Self Movement." He concluded that Wang's insistence on faithfulness was nothing but a "fraudulent disguise under the signboard of faith." This line of argument effectively deflected the debate from "faith versus unbelief" and reframed it as political opposition to the state and the socialist order (Tsui 1955, pp. 14-15).

Tsui underscored that the new Constitution guaranteed freedom of religious belief, even quoting United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld to demonstrate that, despite Wang's vehement opposition to the government, he still enjoyed freedom of publication, speech, and belief—thus countering public suspicion about state restrictions. Viewed in hindsight, especially after Wang's subsequent arrest by the Public Security Bureau, Tsui's argument sought to construct an image of the government as tolerant of dissent, thereby undermining the legitimacy of Wang's narrative of "suffering persecution for faith." Instead, it positioned him as one who "abused freedom" for subversive purposes. The article concluded by asserting that Wang's struggle was not for faith at all, but "for the interests of imperialism." This interpretive shift laid a crucial rhetorical and ideological foundation within the church community for Wang Mingdao's eventual arrest and conviction on political charges (Tsui 1955, p. 15).

In the same *Tianfeng* issue, K. H. Ting published an article titled "A

Solemn Warning to Wang Mingdao." In it, Ting framed Wang Mingdao's insistence on doctrinal purity in *Spiritual Food Quarterly* and his critique of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement as manifestations of hostility and sabotage—directed not only against the church but also against the people and the state. Ting did more than dispute Wang's theological position; he sought to unmask what he portrayed as the underlying essence of Wang's thought: "anti-New China, anti-people, and anti-unity." To achieve this, Ting combined theological rebuttals with concrete examples and accusatory rhetoric, painting Wang's opposition as an ideological threat aligned with reactionary forces. His argument functioned as both a doctrinal critique and a political indictment, signaling that Wang's stance was no longer perceived as a matter of faith alone but as a challenge to the national and social order (Ting 1955, pp. 16–20).

K. H. Ting asserted that Wang Mingdao harbored deep resentment toward the new China, accusing him of "a clear hostility toward the new state." Ting argued that Wang's comparison of New China to Babylon, along with his portrayal of contemporary believers as persecuted martyrs, was intended to incite a spirit of confrontation against the people. Ting highlighted Wang's call in *We—For the Sake of Faith* for believers to "set life and death aside" and to "stake their very lives," interpreting these exhortations not as spiritual nourishment but as a "stimulant for reactionaries." He wrote: "If these appeals are to be called 'spiritual food,' then they suit only those who, lurking on our mainland, are plotting to destroy New China." (Ting 1955, pp. 16–17)

Furthermore, Ting cited Wang's statement: "What you call the toxins of imperialist thought are nothing other than the truths of the Bible," and retorted: "Such words would delight imperialism! But they are also shockingly arrogant and reckless!" He accused Wang of deliberately confusing biblical truth with the distorted interpretations exploited by imperialist forces, framing the state's efforts to eliminate imperialist influence as "persecution of the faith." In Ting's view, this amounted to "shielding imperialism and laundering its crimes." Ting also condemned Wang's refusal to sign the anti-atomic weapons petition, branding it as evidence of his "lack of love for the people" and questioning whether he truly desired to glorify Christ: "If this is not standing in opposition to the people, what is it? ... Even the tone of his words betrays an irreconcilable hostility toward the people." (Ting 1955, pp. 17–19) By this point, Ting's rebuttal was no longer concerned with theological interpretation in *We—For the Sake of Faith*. Instead, it leveraged Wang's rhetoric as proof of political subversion, casting him as a spokesperson for imperialism. The response adopted an unmistakably political stance, transforming a doctrinal dispute into an ideological indictment.

Regarding Wang Mingdao's sharp criticisms of modernists as "disciples

of Judas" and those who "use godliness as a means of gain," K. H. Ting expressed profound indignation. He countered: "These individuals... are loyal servants who love the Lord and hold a pure faith... Wang Mingdao has gone too far." Ting repeatedly emphasized that the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was "God's own work"—a divine process of purification for the church, a necessary stage in which God would "pluck up and break down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant" (Jeremiah 1:10). Thus, Ting insisted: "Since the Three-Self Patriotic Movement is a patriotic movement of Christians, there is absolutely no one within it who uses this movement to propagate a private faith." (Ting 1955, pp. 17–18)

Returning to the theme of "unity," Ting charged that Wang Mingdao was "more obstinate than ever in his refusal to unite." He supported this claim by citing numerous biblical passages that exhort believers to mutual forbearance and respect, declaring: "Unity is not a matter of faith—it is a matter of love." According to Ting, Wang lacked love, was "rigid and dogmatic," and arbitrarily condemned those who held different theological positions. By refusing to acknowledge the possibility of cooperation in patriotic endeavors beyond doctrinal issues, Wang, Ting argued, fractured the unity and witness that the church ought to display. He concluded with a rhetorical question: "What age are we living in? Why must we still cling to sectarian divisions?" (Ting 1955, pp. 19–20)

It becomes evident that Ting portrayed Wang Mingdao as a dogmatic, love-deficient schismatic and leveraged Wang's insistence on doctrinal purity to accuse him of being "anti-people" and "anti-nation," even of "collaborating with imperialism." Under this logic, Wang was no longer simply opposing the Three-Self Movement on theological grounds or out of a conscientious stance for faith; rather, he was framed as a subversive element—one who threatened church unity and endangered social stability. Through Ting's rhetoric, we can clearly observe how Three-Self leaders transformed *We—For the Sake of Faith* from a theological defense into a political text, thereby laying the ideological and rhetorical groundwork for Wang Mingdao's classification as the head of a so-called "counter-revolutionary clique."

## 2. Political Accusations and the Counter-Revolutionary Label

T. C. Chao, then a Standing Committee member of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and a figure explicitly criticized by Wang Mingdao, published a pointed rebuttal titled "A Few Questions Concerning Wang Mingdao." This article marked a decisive shift: the critique of Wang had now moved entirely from theological debate to overt political indictment. The tone was sharp and unapologetically combative, scarcely bothering to maintain a theological pretense; instead, it openly cast Wang as an adversary intent on "undermining

the people's state" (Chao 1955, p. 14).

At the outset, Chao articulated three key positions—each designed to delegitimize Wang's faith-based narrative and firmly delineate the lines of "friend" and "enemy". First, Chao asserted: "Between the people and imperialism, between progress and reaction, there is absolutely no middle road," thereby demanding that Christians choose sides unequivocally in the ideological struggle. Second, he stressed that "respecting others' religious faith" was an essential moral obligation, accusing Wang of presuming to "sit on the judgment seat of God" by arbitrarily branding others as "unbelievers" and "false teachers." Such labeling, Chao argued, disrupted the harmony and mutual respect that should characterize Christian fellowship. Third, Chao charged that Wang's publication of *We—For the Sake of Faith* was nothing more than an attempt to "divert attention," using the pretext of a "fundamentalist-modernist divide" to mask his alleged true intent: sabotaging unity and attacking the government (Chao 1955, p. 14).

Next, T. C. Chao launched a series of rhetorical questions to level political accusations against Wang Mingdao. He first asked: "As a citizen of the People's Republic of China, can one use the excuse of 'for the sake of faith' to refuse to fulfill political obligations?" He then listed several major political events in which Wang had refused to participate, including: refusing to contribute to and support the Resist America, Aid Korea campaign; refusing to sign the petition against the use of atomic weapons; refusing to endorse the liberation of Taiwan; refusing to take part in democratic elections under the Constitution; and, ultimately, completely rejecting the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. In Chao's argument, these actions were all evidence of "serving the enemy in a passive way," directly indicating Wang Mingdao's stance of undermining the people's state, resisting national reconstruction, and submitting to imperialist interests (Chao 1955, p. 14).

The most explosive charge was Chao's citation of Wang Mingdao's statement: "What you call the toxins of imperialist thought are nothing other than the truths of the Bible." Chao ruthlessly labeled this as "reactionary rhetoric," asserting that it proved Wang was disguising the toxins of imperialist ideology as biblical truth in order to instruct believers. He asked: "Consider this: which prophet in the Bible did not actively participate in patriotic political activities? Which prophet did not stand with the people and struggle against anti-people rulers?" Chao went further, declaring that Wang's act of treating such "toxins" as truth was, in essence, the dissemination of imperialist ideological poison and an attempt to champion hostile forces. Even more gravely, Chao accused Wang of exploiting religious language such as "God speaks through my mouth" to mislead the masses, likening him to previously denounced counter-revolutionary religious figures such as Gu

Ren'en and Jing Dianying. He concluded with a call to action for believers: "Now is the time to expose Wang Mingdao! We must rise up to uncover the political background of Wang Mingdao's group and lay bare his reactionary face." (Chao 1955, p. 14)

Undoubtedly, in T. C. Chao's rhetoric, Wang Mingdao was no longer portrayed as a religious figure holding a particular faith stance but had been fully transformed into a political symbol—a negative archetype of being "an enemy of the people." Chao's statement read like a standard political manifesto, deploying rapid-fire questions, accusations, and denunciations to construct a narrative of Wang's record of being "unpatriotic, politically disengaged, and anti-people." These actions were further interpreted as manifestations of imperialist ideological poison, with Chao even insinuating that Wang served as a "religious agent of imperialism."

In this context of comprehensive political characterization, the factual accuracy of the charges T. C. Chao enumerated became irrelevant; what mattered was their political utility. These accusations served as tools to justify state action against Wang Mingdao, furnishing both legitimacy and public support for his designation as a target of suppression. Consequently, Wang's religious convictions, ecclesial practices, and steadfast commitment to faith were all reduced to mere veneers for counter-revolutionary ideology. He was not condemned for specific actions per se but because he had been classified as a "political enemy." Once positioned in opposition to the "patriotic" front, every act could be construed as incriminating evidence, and every silence could be interpreted as a seditious plot.

In reality, T. C. Chao was well-versed in the propaganda logic prevalent during the 1955 Anti-Rightist political climate—linking dissenting religious voices with state enemies and imperialism. Through mass mobilization, moral denunciation, and political struggle sessions, religious dissent was thoroughly stigmatized and stripped of legitimacy—a phenomenon not limited to Christianity but observable across other religious spheres as well (Xueyu 2015, pp. 384–389). As an intellectual within the church and a representative voice for the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, Chao's discourse operated as part of a broader ideological apparatus, aligning with the state's effort to enforce ideological uniformity and dismantle the autonomous space of the church. This discursive maneuver transformed Wang Mingdao from a "defender of fundamentalist faith" into a "threat to national security." Such a narrative strategy directly laid the groundwork for legitimizing the public campaigns of "confession" and "repentance" later imposed on Wang Mingdao and his followers, many of whom were already imprisoned at the time.

At the same time, as Chairman of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, Y. T. Wu delivered a speech at the Jiangnan Conference on August 17, 1955, in

which he assigned an explicitly political characterization to Wang Mingdao using harsh and accusatory language. Wu opened bluntly: "Wang Mingdao's counter-revolutionary crimes have now been exposed. He is a counter-revolutionary disguised in religious garb—a wolf in sheep's clothing." Such rhetoric, steeped in the tone of struggle sessions, immediately stripped Wang of his identity as a Christian and recast him as an "enemy" within the binary of friend versus foe. Wu accused Wang of having "consistently colluded with imperialism and reactionaries for decades" and of plotting to "overthrow the People's Republic of China and restore imperialism and reactionary forces in the country." This framing positioned Wang's religious statements and actions squarely as acts of political hostility, providing the theoretical rationale and legal legitimacy for his arrest ("Speech by President Y. T. Wu..." 1955, pp. 10–12).

It is noteworthy that Y. T. Wu did not address Wang Mingdao's critique of his work *Darkness and Light*. At this moment, Wu deliberately avoided engaging in substantive theological debate, shifting instead to a purely political attack. He characterized Wang's delineation of "Fundamentalists versus Modernists" in *We—For the Sake of Faith* as a "smokescreen to confuse the public" and a calculated attempt to "split the Three-Self Patriotic Movement." In other words, Wu refrained from offering any theological rebuttal and instead interpreted the entire matter as a manifestation of counter-revolutionary intent and hostile maneuvering. Thus, every point of faith-based contention was redefined as politically motivated subversion ("Speech by President Wu Y. T. ..." 1955, pp. 10–11).

Y. T. Wu also spoke from personal testimony, emphasizing the relationship between "faith and action," framing his support for the Three-Self Movement, endorsement of the Communist Party, and participation in anti-American and anti-Chiang campaigns as expressions of loyalty to Christian faith. He explicitly stated: "My advocacy of resistance against Japan and Chiang, my opposition to America, my support for the Communist Party, and my initiation of the Three-Self Movement with fellow believers in the country—these were not motivated by politics but by religious faith." This argument aimed to counter the Spiritualist stance of separating faith from politics, seeking to present the Three-Self Movement not as a political manifesto but as a practical outworking of Christian belief in China ("Speech by President Y. T. Wu..." 1955, pp. 10–12). In Wu's narrative, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was a voluntary organization initiated by Chinese Christians themselves, not a party-state-imposed structure—a perspective that remains the mainstream interpretation of Three-Self history. At the same time, Wu integrated "patriotism" into the core test of Christian faith, asserting: "The line we ought to draw is not between belief and unbelief...but between

patriotism and lack of patriotism." Such a nationalized reinterpretation of Christian doctrine effectively sacralized the Three-Self Movement, constructing a theological logic in which loyalty to the nation became synonymous with loyalty to God ("Speech by President Y. T. Wu..." 1955, p. 12).

Furthermore, Y. T. Wu delivered a highly political critique of Wang Mingdao during his speech at an expanded meeting of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, aiming to align with the political climate of the "Suppression of Counterrevolutionaries" campaign and to intensify efforts within the religious sector to expose and purge "counterrevolutionaries." In his address, Wu called on all Christians to report individuals associated with Wang Mingdao, insisting that the church must "cleanse itself of degenerates and purify its ranks." Under the intense pressure of the Anti-Rightist atmosphere, Wang Mingdao was no longer regarded as a defender of faith but had been fully categorized as part of the state's enemy camp, subject to comprehensive political repudiation and attack (Wu 1955, pp. 9–12). Wu's rhetoric went beyond personal accusation, portraying Wang as the principal adversary of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and an agent of imperialism, further reinforcing the ideological narrative that religion must submit to state policy and serve as an instrument of political conformity.

In such a climate of political repression and relentless public denunciation, Wang Mingdao's voice was effectively silenced, leaving him no space for open response or self-defense (*Tianfeng* Editorial Office 1955, pp. 2–4; "Tianjin Churches Hold Forum..." 1955, pp. 5–6; "Letters from Believers Nationwide..." 1955, pp. 7–9; Jian 1955, p. 2; *Tianfeng* Editorial Office 1955, pp. 3–7; *Tianfeng* Editorial Office 1955, pp. 8–9; *Tianfeng* Editorial Office 1955, pp. 10–13; Chao 1955, p. 14; "Believers Nationwide United..." 1955, pp. 15–17; "Short Commentary—Resolutely..." 1955, p. 2; Zheng 1955, pp. 3–8; "Pastors Nationwide Hold Forums..." 1955, pp. 9–10; He 1955, pp. 3–4; Liang 1955, p. 4; Yu 1955, p. 5; "Preface to 'Expose...'" 1955, pp. 4–5; "The Relationship Between..." 1955, pp. 6–7; Committee on Study 1955, pp. 5–9; Li 1955, p. 11; "Short Commentary—Eliminate..." 1955, p. 2; "Guangzhou Churches Expose..." 1955, pp. 3–6; "I Accuse Wang Mingdao..." 1955, pp. 8–9; "Preface to 'Accusations...'" 1955, pp. 2–3; "Believers Nationwide Angrily..." 1955, pp. 4–5; Cui 1955, pp. 6–7; Chen 1955, pp. 13–14; Tan 1955, pp. 23–27; "Wang Mingdao Harms Nation..." 1955, p. 28). Though he spoke in the name of faith and sought to uphold what he believed to be truth, the rebuttals and condemnations from the Three-Self Movement had long surpassed the realm of theology or intra-church differences. Instead, he was branded as a political heretic, in language and tone nearly identical to the state's criminal indictment against him. This reveals that the controversy was not merely a theological

dispute within the Christian faith, but a sweeping purge under the guise of ideological struggle within the party-state context. Frankly, as a fragile individual, how could he possibly withstand the immense machinery of a state operating with full force within the church?

#### IV. The Contested Meaning of *We—For the Sake of Faith* as a Manifesto

After Wang Mingdao's arrest in August 1955, news of his situation spread through various channels, sparking intense concern among churches in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and among Chinese Christians in North America and Southeast Asia. His story soon became a defining example of "suffering for Christ" within the Chinese church, drawing profound sympathy and respect. His unwavering stance—expressed in *We—For the Sake of Faith*—his refusal to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, and his bold denunciation of syncretistic faith practices, established his reputation as one who stood firm for the truth and resisted authoritarian pressure, often hailed as a "modern martyr" (Brother David 1990; Lin and Zhang 1995; Wang 2000). Within the Cold War context, Wang Mingdao came to be portrayed as concrete evidence of the persecution of Christians under the communist regime. Numerous overseas evangelical and missionary organizations cited his case as representative of the suffering Chinese church, launching prayer movements and advocacy campaigns in his support. His writings, sermons, and periodicals such as *Spiritual Food Quarterly* were collected, reprinted, and widely circulated, profoundly shaping subsequent narratives of "the persecuted church" both within China's emerging house church movement and among overseas Chinese congregations ("The Wang Mingdao Collection" 1995). By the 1980s, Wang's resolute refusal to compromise fundamental doctrines reinforced the identification and support of overseas Chinese churches for unofficial house churches in China. Consequently, Wang Mingdao became not merely a personal symbol of fidelity to faith but a pivotal spiritual figure for understanding the history of Christian suffering in modern China.

##### 1. The Contested Interpretations of *We—For the Sake of Faith*

In the 1980s, K. H. Ting explicitly instructed Wang Weifan to provide a clarification, stating: "Certain individuals in Hong Kong and overseas are making every effort to draw this conclusion: that Mr. Wang Mingdao's later arrest was due to his opposition to the Three-Self Movement. This is completely contrary to the facts." (Wang 1989, p. 13) In other words, Ting sought to emphasize that Wang Mingdao's arrest was a decision made by the Party-state in response to his extreme words and actions, and that it had



nothing to do with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement as an organization.

At this time, Wang Weifan, already serving as a professor at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, wrote an article titled "Y. T. Wu and Wang Mingdao," mainly to revisit the polemics of the 1950s and address the debates between himself and Wang. Wang Weifan sought to reinterpret for the Chinese Christian community the relationship between Wang Mingdao and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, as well as the nature of their conflict. His argument unfolded along the following lines, reflecting an intention toward historical reconciliation (Wang 1989, pp. 12–13).

In order to affirm the legitimacy of the Three-Self Principles, Wang Weifan emphasized the "justice" and "mutual respect of faith" underlying them. He pointed out that many fundamentalist church leaders of the time—such as Jia Yuming and Xie Yongqin—though initially cautious, eventually supported the Three-Self initiative. This, he argued, demonstrated that the movement was not designed to suppress faith. Y. T. Wu's original intent: Wang asserted that Wu promoted unity out of "love for the church" and even renamed the movement as the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" to reduce misunderstanding. Reframing the 1955 controversy: Wang portrayed the early debates before 1955 as "mild, rational exchanges of thought" that avoided personal attacks. He claimed that neither he nor other contributors to *Tian Feng* initially named Wang Mingdao; their writings, he said, focused on promoting unity. In contrast, Wang Mingdao's decision to "name names" and sharply criticize Wu, Wang, and others in *We—For the Sake of Faith* forced *Tian Feng* to escalate its tone and eventually use terms like "reactionary," though, Wang stressed, never "counter-revolutionary." Denial of responsibility for Wang Mingdao's arrest: Wang repeatedly clarified that "no one in the Three-Self organization had such authority," asserting that Wang Mingdao's imprisonment was a government decision based on "political activities," not because of his opposition to the Three-Self Movement. He stated explicitly: "Wang Mingdao was arrested for counterrevolution, not for opposing the Three-Self." Criticism of Wang Mingdao's rhetoric: Wang described Wang Mingdao's writings as numerous and highly aggressive, marked by "malicious language and personal attacks" against church elders. Finally, Wang expressed hope that the aging Wang Mingdao, after his release, would "turn back," noting that the church had since developed well under the Three-Self framework. He also remarked that "every national conference prayed for Wang Mingdao," presenting an image of historical magnanimity and self-legitimation (Wang 1989, p. 12).

In this paper, Wang Weifan's tone is conciliatory, revealing an apparent attempt to mend historical rifts. However, it must be acknowledged that his defense of *Tian Feng* and Y. T. Wu as engaging in a "rational exchange of ideas"

overlooks the dramatic rhetorical shift that occurred after 1955, when *Tian Feng* and other official publications clearly aligned with the "Suppress Counterrevolutionaries" campaign and broader political purges. Leading figures such as K. H. Ting, T. C. Chao, and Y. T. Wu themselves later explicitly equated Wang Mingdao with imperialism, espionage, and counterrevolution, language that moved far beyond the boundaries of theological debate (Wang 1989, p. 13). Wang Weifan's effort seems aimed at presenting the Three-Self Movement as more religious in nature and self-initiated, yet the historical record demonstrates that as early as the mid-1950s, the movement actively synchronized with the state's accusatory discourse. Y. T. Wu, though he initially emphasized "mutual respect of faith," gradually accommodated political critique, presided over or tacitly endorsed *Tian Feng's* high-pressure rhetoric, and, contrary to Wang's assertion that he "never wrote any article rebutting Wang Mingdao," explicitly supported the government's handling of Wang by branding him a counter-revolutionary in speeches such as his Jiangnan address and contributions to *Mu Sheng* and other publications. Four decades later, can these documentary realities simply be disregarded by Wang Weifan? His selective recollection and omission of these historical materials clearly call into serious question the integrity and authenticity of his retrospective narrative.

Criticism of Wang Mingdao often began with "doctrinal differences" but quickly slid into a framework of "enemies and allies." Wang Weifan attempted to separate these two dimensions, claiming that the Three-Self Movement engaged only in theological debate while political judgment followed an entirely different system. However, this view overlooks the structural entanglement between the Three-Self Movement and the state—by its very nature, the movement could not remain an outsider. Wang argued that Wang Mingdao was excessively radical, whereas the Three-Self Movement remained consistently rational and tolerant, and thus was not the root cause of Wang's political disaster. Yet, viewed in the broader historical context, the Three-Self Movement and the regime had long formed an integrated discursive apparatus, and the collective criticism and labeling of Wang Mingdao were indeed part of a political struggle. Wang's retrospective account reflects the pattern of official religious narratives in the post-1980s era—aimed at justifying the past—but its minimization of the coercive political climate and shifting of responsibility warrant critical historical scrutiny.<sup>6</sup>

By the 1980s, Wang Mingdao was living in his home in Shanghai, where a steady stream of visitors came to see him, causing unease among

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<sup>6</sup> Wang Weifan later compiled this article into a book published in Hong Kong (Wang 2011, pp. 577–562).

government officials. They specifically warned him not to engage in any more "counter-revolutionary" activities. Wang responded bluntly:

"Before God, I am full of wounds and utterly broken—a great sinner. But with regard to the laws of the state, I have never violated a single one. From childhood I have been timid and thin-skinned, never daring to break the law. In school I was a student who strictly observed the rules; in the nation and society I was a law-abiding citizen. Yet you still arrested me. I have never broken any national law; I spent over twenty years in prison entirely because of my faith... I opposed the Three-Self Church, and I still oppose it to this day." (Wang 1997, p. 245)

This late-life statement by Wang Mingdao underscores that what he opposed was not the state itself but the distortion of the church's spiritual essence represented by the theology of the Three-Self Movement's "modernist" faction. His assertion, "I have never broken any national law; I spent over twenty years in prison entirely because of my faith," reveals the core reason he consistently refused to acknowledge himself as a "counter-revolutionary." In his view, his arrest resulted from his defense of the independence of the church and the purity of faith as mandated by Scripture (Wang 1997, p. 245).

From another perspective, Wang Mingdao's statement, "I oppose the Three-Self Church, and I still oppose it," was intended to clarify that his stance did not stem from hostility toward the state but from opposition to a religious organization that, in his view, compromised essential principles of faith. For him, the Three-Self Church was not merely an administrative body but a system that subordinated faith to modernist theology—something fundamentally irreconcilable with his convictions.

However, the political context of the 1950s, marked by a high-pressure atmosphere of ideological conformity, rendered such a purely faith-driven stance as an act of "anti-government" or "anti-socialist system." Consequently, during Wang Mingdao's imprisonment, some at home and abroad framed his opposition to the Three-Self Movement as resistance to the Communist Party or the socialist system—another narrative that politicized a theological dispute (Mingyan 1991, p. 13).

Wang's self-description that he had been "timid since childhood, thin-skinned, and never dared to break the law" was neither pretentious nor evasive but an expression of his caution and self-restraint as a law-abiding citizen (Wang 1997, p. 245). His opposition was not political but spiritual; his concern was not the regime itself but whether the church could still freely acknowledge, proclaim, and preserve the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith without censorship. This was also why, after his release, Wang wrote appeals to the People's Court in Shanghai, seeking to overturn the

verdict against the so-called "Wang Mingdao counter-revolutionary Clique." In these petitions, he repeatedly emphasized that his imprisonment was solely for the sake of faith, not because of hostility toward the state (Ying 2009, pp. 211–214).

Therefore, Wang Mingdao consistently regarded himself not as a political dissenter but as a witness to the faith. Yet the suffering and imprisonment he endured vividly reveal how, in a highly politicized era, religious freedom was curtailed and internal theological disputes within the church were elevated to the level of political antagonism. While opposing the Three-Self Movement, Wang repeatedly asserted that his stance did not conflict with national law, nor did it stem from opposition to the state; rather, his resistance lay in refusing to allow the faith to merge with modernist theology. Although he recognized the political forces behind the modernist camp, he explicitly stated that his opposition to the Three-Self Movement had nothing to do with resisting the government.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, his experience underscores a critical reality: when the state equates church loyalty with political conformity, anyone who stands for faith but does not align with the Party-State's notion of "unity" is easily branded as "counter-revolutionary" or anti-government. This was the peril Wang Mingdao fully understood—yet he willingly bore the cost.

Regarding Wang Mingdao's late-life confession of faith, Philip L. Wickeri—who maintained a long friendship with K. H. Ting and authored the biography *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church*—offers a different interpretation when discussing the debates between Wang Mingdao and Ting in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> Wickeri acknowledges that, in the 1950s, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was primarily a political unity campaign under the banner of "anti-imperialist patriotism," rather than an effort to achieve theological unity among Christians from different denominational backgrounds. "This was especially emphasized in dealing with evangelicals and fundamentalists, to reassure them that their faith was not being 'diluted' or compromised by participation in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement." (Wickeri 2007, pp. 149–150) At the same time, he argues that by 1955, the confrontation between Wang and Ting was no longer a theological debate but had become an intensely politicized conflict, decisively shaped by the ideological struggles of that era. He further states:

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7 According to Ni Buxiao's research, Wang Mingdao was fully aware that the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was an organization supported and promoted by the government amid the increasingly intense political accusation campaigns of the 1950s. See (Ni 2025, pp. 271–330).

8 This book was first published in English and later translated and expanded for release in Chinese in 2022 (Wickeri 2007).

"According to Wang Mingdao, K. H. Ting was a "modernist" aligned with the government, and the debate between them centered on the core principles of Christian faith. From Ting's perspective, Wang showed no concern for fellowship with Christians of differing views and appeared indifferent to patriotism and the anti-imperialist struggle. This, in Ting's view, revealed a political stance that sought to accommodate Western interests. Wang opposed Ting's theology, while Ting criticized Wang on political grounds. Wang regarded small denominational churches as gatherings of true believers, whereas Ting adopted a broader vision of the church, emphasizing mutual respect to maintain unity amid diversity." (Wickeri 2007, p. 151)

Thus, Wang Mingdao's refusal to cooperate with Ting and others was seen as a narrow and exclusionary theological stance, whereas Ting emphasized the integration of politics and theology, which he regarded as an inclusive and pragmatic approach. In Wickeri view, this represented a theology characterized by mutual respect and diversity.

Furthermore, in Wickeri's view, Wang Mingdao's refusal to join the Three-Self Movement was interpreted as both unpatriotic and anti-government: "He became internationally known for his opposition to the Chinese Communist government and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, winning deep admiration among conservative Christian circles in both China and the West." (Wickeri 2007, p. 150) Wickeri adds, in a critical tone, that "whether in the 1950s or today, fundamentalism could never serve as the foundation for Christian participation in a socialist society with Chinese characteristics" (Wickeri 2007, p. 152). He continues: "In many religious traditions, fundamentalism is the most common response to modernization, but it is always a reactionary force rather than a creative response. While Wang Mingdao's works remain popular in some Chinese churches, these communities offer little room for open dialogue. In contrast, Ting's vision of mutual respect created the possibility for Christians from different backgrounds to work together." (Wickeri 2007, p. 152)

Wickeri classifies Wang Mingdao's theological stance as a reactionary form of "fundamentalism" and characterizes fundamentalism as resistance to "modernization" rather than a constructive dialogue partner. This represents a critique of the fundamentalist theological tradition. His underlying implication is that such a faith perspective cannot adapt to the modern trajectory of socialist China and cannot serve as a resource for developing a "Chinese-contextualized theology." In sharp contrast, K. H. Ting is portrayed as a symbol of "openness, plurality, and mutual respect," representing a path of "modernist theology" that can coexist with a socialist state and actively participate in public life. Here, the affirmation is not merely of Ding's theology

itself but of the fact that he embodies a theological orientation politically acceptable and aligned with state expectations. This pluralistic theology is presented as the legitimate path for the future development of the Chinese church.

The most noteworthy aspect of Wickeri's statement is its blurring of the boundary between theology and politics. What Wang Mingdao asserted in *We—For the Sake of Faith* was a core issue of "belief or unbelief," yet it is reframed here as the cause of "hostile attitudes." This effectively interprets the question of fundamentalism as a potential source of social instability, introducing an alternative form of "politicized critique" of doctrinal purity. Such a critique mirrors the logic of the 1950s official discourse that equated Wang Mingdao's theological stance with a political position.

This approach arguably marginalizes Wang Mingdao's legacy from the perspective of faith transmission, not merely as a theological disagreement but as a warning against a mode of Christianity deemed incompatible with contemporary Chinese church development. Wickeri's analysis reveals that the divergence between Wang Mingdao and K. H. Ting represents two contrasting theological orientations, illustrating what counts as an "acceptable" faith model under the current Chinese theological and social context, and what is relegated to an incommensurable, non-dialogical position. In short, Wickeri's interpretation frames the future direction of the Chinese church not around Wang's fundamentalist commitment to faith purity, but around a pluralistic and inclusive vision premised on the capacity to engage with socialist modernization.

## 2. The Declaration Texts of Unregistered Churches

In fact, Wickeri overlooks the influence of Wang Mingdao's *We—For the Sake of Faith* on the motivation of Chinese house churches (unregistered churches) to resist those who differ on the essence of faith. He also glosses over their commitment to Christ and their public stance regarding politics. For example, unregistered churches such as Beijing Shouwang Church and Chengdu Early Rain Covenant Church are far from the imagined picture of irrationality or backward, closed-off religious spaces.

During the 2010 outdoor worship incident involving Beijing Shouwang Church, Elder Sun Yi (孫毅) wrote an article titled "Why We Do Not Join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement?" In it, he publicly declared the church's stance to the government, explicitly citing Wang Mingdao's 1955 essay *We—For the Sake of Faith*. Sun emphasized that the fundamental reason for refusing to join the "Three-Self" organization lies in differences of faith, and that this does not hinder the church's openness and public visibility. He also pointed out that Wang Mingdao regarded the "Three-Self" Movement as a conflict between

"Fundamentalists" and "Modernists," asserting that the essence of "modernist" was unbelief, and therefore refused any form of union with it. By referencing Wang, Sun made it clear that Shouwang Church's refusal to join the "Three-Self" was not based on practical benefits but was rooted in a firm commitment to preserving pure faith (Sun 2015, p. 29).

It is precisely this refusal to compromise with the "church-state integration" system inherent in the nature of the Three-Self organization, insisting on the inalienable spiritual sovereignty of the church as the Body of Christ, that prompted various house church networks across the country, along with overseas Chinese Christians, to support Shouwang Church. They even issued a public petition to the National People's Congress titled *We—For the Sake of Faith* in connection with the Shouwang incident. The main purpose of the petition was to assert that when the government requires churches to register under the Three-Self system, the church must uphold the principle of maintaining pure and authentic faith. They further explained that their refusal to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was not an act of defiance against the government, but a matter of fundamental doctrinal difference. Through this petition, they called on the National People's Congress to respect the constitutional right of religious freedom and to cease forcing churches to register or interfering in the church's internal spiritual affairs ("*We—For the Sake of Faith: A Citizen Petition...*" 2011).

Undoubtedly, Shouwang Church's refusal to join the Three-Self organization was not driven by hostility toward the government or by a desire for special privileges, but by the conviction that the church is the Body of Christ and that, in spiritual matters, it should submit directly to Christ's authority rather than to state-imposed structures. In a sense, this emphasis on the inalienability of the church's spiritual sovereignty is a continuation of Wang Mingdao's position in the 1950s: rejecting any "organizational union" while affirming only "unity in the Spirit." However, Shouwang Church took this stance a step further by explicitly declaring that the Three-Self organization is a government-led institution which requires churches to register and accept administrative oversight, thereby subjecting the invisible life of the church to a controllable institutional framework. This, they argued, constitutes an infringement on the church's spiritual sovereignty (Sun 2015, p. 29).

Like Wang Mingdao and the Beijing Christian Assembly, Shouwang Church also faced administrative and public security pressure. However, its statements and actions took place in a relatively open environment under international attention, and its engagement with the government carried stronger legal appeals and a more public character, rather than outright confrontation with the state. In other words, Shouwang Church did not reject

public dialogue; on the contrary, it emphasized interaction with the government, legal professionals, and both domestic and international opinion. Their "non-cooperation" was an expression of religious freedom with civic consciousness, not a denial of the state or social order. Submitting petitions, seeking legal assistance, and publishing open letters all indicated a strategy of "striving for religious freedom within the boundaries of the system." Thus, Shouwang Church's reference to Wang Mingdao's *We—For the Sake of Faith* created communal resonance and reinforced house church identity. Yet, Shouwang's actions went beyond citing an article—they embodied an interpretive tradition of faith. In the public sphere, this helped mobilize national and overseas Chinese churches to recognize and support their cause. This underscores that Wang Mingdao's legacy continues to hold significant symbolic power, providing historical legitimacy and a consciously public articulation of faith for movements seeking spiritual autonomy in the Chinese church.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Rev. Joshua Wang of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, publicly stated in 2015 that Wang Mingdao's essay *We—For the Sake of Faith*, written before his arrest in 1955, is the most important foundational text for the birth of China's house church movement and "a classic manifesto of Chinese Christians' commitment to religious freedom in the 20th century" (Wang 2019, p. 92). Joshua Wang argued that this text is not only a concentrated expression of Wang Mingdao's faith position but also carries both theological and political significance. Theologically, it upholds the absolute authority of Scripture; politically, it rejects any regime's interference in matters of faith, manifesting the transcendence of faith. It was precisely this unwavering stance under "totalitarian pressure" that made this apologetic declaration one of the most outstanding testimonies of faith in the 20th-century Chinese church and laid the spiritual foundation and theological tradition for the house church movement. He further declared that Early Rain Covenant Church sees itself as a direct heir to this faith tradition (Wang 2019, p. 92).

In this interpretation, Wang Mingdao is not merely expressing dissatisfaction with the Three-Self Movement; rather, he is engaging in a theological defense of the church's ontological independence and doctrinal purity under the constraints of totalitarian politics. This positioning transforms Wang Mingdao from an individual into a foundational figure for the construction of a collective identity—providing the theological source for house churches to resist affiliation with the Three-Self system and to uphold

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9 For studies on Shouwang Church, several works are available: (Kan 2013, chap. 6; Yuan 2014; Zhu 2015; Yu and Wang 2015; Sun 2022; Gao 2013, pp. 117–154)



congregational sovereignty. Although Joshua Wang argues that Wang Mingdao's refusal to join the Three-Self Movement was not an act of political confrontation but a determination to preserve the transcendence of faith and the purity of the church, he portrays Wang as a representative of the stance that resists political interference in ecclesial life. Joshua Wang explains: "Wang Mingdao did not represent a church tradition that avoids political discussion, but rather a church tradition that declares: *Politics cannot influence my faith*. Whether we speak about politics or remain silent, the purpose is to manifest the transcendence of faith itself. This tradition is one that bears witness to and demonstrates the transcendence of faith and the church in the face of totalitarian politics." (Wang 2019, p. 92) In short, Joshua Wang is not merely conducting historical retrieval; he is actively engaging in interpretation and application to construct the "historical influence" and "spiritual symbolism" of this text as a theological and ideological resource for legitimizing the public identity of the house church movement.

Beyond the public statements and citations by mainland Chinese house churches, the 2015 conference titled "Wang Mingdao and the Rise of the Chinese House Church" held in Vancouver, Canada, provided an important occasion for overseas Chinese Christians to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Wang Mingdao's publication of *We—For the Sake of Faith*. The participants reaffirmed the core theological stance conveyed in this text, regarding it as a shared confession of faith for the Chinese Christian diaspora. They emphasized that this apologetic declaration not only demonstrates the church's unwavering commitment to Christ as the head and the Bible as the ultimate authority, but also represents a categorical rejection of political interference and modernist theology's distortion of the gospel. The text is viewed as the origin and foundation of the spiritual tradition of China's house churches. The conference further underscored that just as Wang Mingdao and others suffered persecution for their steadfastness in truth, today's churches—both within China and abroad—must inherit this uncompromising spirit of faith, resist heresies and the oppression of secular powers, and "remain united in the truth, courageously walking the way of the cross" (ChinaAid 2015). This illustrates that Wang Mingdao's text functions not only as a historical testimony but also as an identity marker for overseas Chinese churches, embodying a cross-generational collective memory of rejecting political control over religious life.

In addition, the U.S.-based Chinese Christian magazine *Chinese Christian Life Fellowship*, since its founding in 1995, has been one of the most widely read publications among Christians in China's house churches. The magazine once published a book titled *A Specimen of the Unbelieving Faction—An Analysis of The Collected Works of K. H. Ting* (Li 2003). This work reaffirmed Wang

Mingdao's criteria and definition of the "unbelieving faction" and drew extensively on his apologetic stance in *We—For the Sake of Faith*, which emphasizes the authority of Scripture and the refusal to compromise on essential doctrines. In doing so, it offered a theological response to K. H. Ting's views and demonstrated that even after half a century, the spirit of "contending earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" remains alive in certain overseas Chinese churches. This illustrates the profound and enduring influence of *We—For the Sake of Faith* on contemporary Chinese diaspora churches. It also underscores their assertion that the Three-Self Patriotic Movement still carries elements of modernist theology—or what they term the "unbelieving faction." This claim continues to serve as a critical theological foundation and spiritual resource for many house churches Christians in China who refuse to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement system (Li 2003, pp. 7–9).

From the above, it is evident that within the diverse spectrum of faith in the contemporary Chinese church, the image of Wang Mingdao is far from uniform. When this text was re-appropriated by house church leaders such as Joshua Wang and Sun Yi, as well as overseas Chinese Christian leaders, its role shifted from being merely a theological defense document to being interpreted as a "symbol of faith" and an "identity marker." It became an important basis for house churches to reject the union of church and state and to uphold the independence and spiritual sovereignty of the church. Conversely, within the Three-Self Patriotic Movement system, some discourses interpret Wang Mingdao's *We—For the Sake of Faith* as ostensibly related to the defense of doctrinal purity, but in essence, still regard it as a representative work of "refusal of unity" and "theological narrowness." Therefore, the reception history of Wang Mingdao's text is itself a site of contested interpretations within a field of power. Different church systems interpret Wang Mingdao to legitimize their own stance or assert their superiority. To this day, no single interpretation has formed an uncontested "orthodox" narrative capable of persuading the other side. Rather, these divergent readings reveal that the reception of Wang Mingdao's theological symbol is not merely an act of preserving memory, but also a struggle for meaning, reflecting the persistent pluralism within the Chinese church.<sup>10</sup> This,

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10 In contrast to the above interpretations of *We—For the Sake of Faith*, Zhou Zijian of the Brethren Assembly in Hong Kong takes a different approach in his work *We Are Also for the Sake of Faith: Reflections on the Faith Stance of Today's Evangelicals*. By revisiting the spirit of Wang Mingdao's *We—For the Sake of Faith*, Zhou highlights the current faith crisis within contemporary evangelicalism, particularly criticizing the emergence of the "New Evangelical" movement within evangelical churches. He strongly denounces the incorporation of philosophy, psychology, and other

in fact, embodies the existential significance of Wang Mingdao's confession: the text of *We—For the Sake of Faith* continues to live on through its ongoing reading, interpretation, transmission, and debate—an enduring and dynamic process even today.

### Conclusion

Wang Mingdao's *We—For the Sake of Faith* is a faith text of profound historical significance in the history of the contemporary Chinese church. Its content and meaning have undergone multiple layers of dialogue, debate, transformation, and re-interpretation throughout the course of history, evolving from a theological document into a powerful symbol and an identity marker, producing far-reaching historical effects. The text's original historical significance lies in its role as a declaration of autonomy by fundamentalist Christians in the 1950s, resisting the encroachment of modernist theology and its push for "unity" that threatened the integrity of the church's faith. In this context, Wang Mingdao sharply perceived that the compromises and modern tendencies of modernist theology were not merely academic disputes, but a deeper danger of the church being fully assimilated under the guise of "unity." For this reason, he explicitly articulated the fundamentalist position, clearly demarcating an unbridgeable line between "true faith" and "false faith."

Thus, in its textual meaning, *We—For the Sake of Faith* first represents the defense of core Christian doctrines by conservative believers, and at the same time voices the resistance of churches striving to maintain their independence and refusing to merge with the modernist camp. Moreover, this text was published in 1955, at a time when the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was advancing aggressively, and churches were under immense pressure for political rectification and self-reform. Wang Mingdao fully understood that making this statement public would inevitably expose him to unpredictable pressures. Nevertheless, he emphasized that Christians must stand firm on biblical truth, even in the face of persecution—demonstrating a form of martyr-like public witness of faith within the life of the church.

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secular elements into theology, arguing that such influences deviate from biblical truth and urgently require the church's serious reflection and repentance. Zhou emphasizes that the church should return to pure biblical faith and reject humanistic ideas from philosophy, psychology, and sociology, in order to discern truth from error. His aim is for the church to continue Wang Mingdao's original apologetic stance and courage. Thus, in Zhou's interpretation, *We—For the Sake of Faith* primarily serves as a warning and critique of the faith crisis within the modern church, underlining the necessity of steadfast adherence to biblical orthodoxy—an essential element of China's evangelical tradition as Zhou understands it (Zhou 2006).

In reality, the debate between Wang Mingdao and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement vividly reveals the fundamental divide within the church at that time regarding how to navigate the relationship between faith and politics. Wang Mingdao sought to clarify that he was not opposing the Communist Party or the government, but rather affirming the independence and purity of the Christian church. However, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, represented by *Tian Feng* magazine, consistently treated "joining the Three-Self Movement" as the absolute criterion for determining whether a church was patriotic. They uniformly asserted that refusing to join the movement equated to being unpatriotic, and more gravely, to being labeled counter-revolutionary and anti-government. The Three-Self Movement's critical stance and rejection of Wang's text demonstrate the extremely limited space for dissent. Their discourse of condemnation and labeling underscores how political power asserted control over the definition of "patriotism," forcefully intruding into the realm of religion. This dynamic exposes the deep and irreconcilable tension between state ideology and religious freedom in the 1950s.

Thus, under the dual pressure of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the state power behind it, Wang Mingdao's suffering elevated the significance of this text beyond the realm of theological debate. As the TSPM's response gradually shifted from theological discourse to political labeling, portraying Wang as a "counter-revolutionary" and a "hostile force," the handling of the issue through politicization ironically reinforced Wang Mingdao's symbolic status as a non-TSPM figure in subsequent history. His steadfastness and suffering unintentionally established a paradigm for the martyrdom tradition within the Chinese church. Consequently, this text became not only a theological discourse but also a historical testimony that embodied the sharp tension between political persecution and the perseverance of faith. It was transformed into a symbolic language representing the spiritual emblem of Christians refusing to compromise under political pressure. For this reason, it has served as a faith perspective and a practical foundation for some churches in China to maintain their stance of "not joining the TSPM."

As seen in the reinterpretation of this text by China's house churches and overseas Chinese churches after the Reform and Opening period, *We—For the Sake of Faith* was endowed with new historical significance in a contemporary context, becoming an important identity marker and theological basis for unofficial church communities. Wang Mingdao's theological logic in opposing the TSPM continued to influence house churches in mainland China after the 1980s. Their refusal to join the official registration system was not driven by political positions but by a conviction that the church is a community of faith,

and that TSPM-affiliated churches still contain elements of modernist theology—or what Wang termed the “unbelieving faction.” Furthermore, they insisted that the spiritual sovereignty of the church as the Body of Christ is non-transferable to any secular regime. As a result, house churches regard Wang’s position as a legitimate foundation for defending the independence and purity of faith. Over time, this text was redefined from a theological treatise into a declaration of spiritual resistance. Contemporary house churches such as Shouwang Church and Early Rain Covenant Church have publicly cited Wang’s text, demonstrating that it has become a crucial spiritual resource and common language for resisting religious control systems in the public sphere. Its enduring influence is evident.

It is worth noting that the historical status of *We—For the Sake of Faith* is inherently complex, as reflected in the contested interpretations and competing claims over its meaning. The official TSPM system once framed this text as narrow-minded, dogmatic, and even reactionary theological rhetoric, aiming to weaken its influence and undermine its legitimacy as an expression of faith. In contrast, house churches and the overseas Chinese Christian community have reinforced its symbolic role as the “foundational text” marking the birth of the house church movement, interpreting Wang Mingdao as a steadfast exemplar of suffering for Christ. This contest for meaning highlights the persistent and diverse spectrum of church models and theological perspectives within Chinese Christianity. Yet, it cannot be denied that in the reception history of Chinese Christianity, the text also reflects the church’s prolonged struggle over the tension between faith autonomy and religious freedom. In other words, *We—For the Sake of Faith* became a classic in the history of the Chinese church precisely because it embodies the struggle of Christian faith under the party-state and its mode of response. From a theological argument addressing a specific historical context, it has evolved into a declaration of faith that transcends its original setting and carries profound symbolic significance. This transformation from text to symbol bears witness to the perseverance and martyr-like spirit within Chinese church history. It also reveals that the state’s relationship with religion has fundamentally been about exercising control rather than granting genuine religious freedom, a tension that continues to this day, shaping how Chinese Christians interpret and practice the call of *We—For the Sake of Faith*.

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