

**Bathsheba as an Object Lesson: Gender, Modernity, and Biblical Examples in
Wang Mingdao's Sermons and Writings**

The first decades of the twentieth century, known as the Republican period in modern Chinese history, were times of dramatic and profound social change. The women's question was an important issue of concern in the watershed intellectual movement of the era, the May Fourth Movement. Even though the movement began as a political protest against the Versailles Treaty in 1919, it subsequently merged and became synonymous with the New Culture Movement, an intellectual movement that had begun a few years earlier. In their iconoclastic critiques of traditional Chinese culture and society, which were directed most often against Confucianism, May Fourth writers promoted images of the new woman, who was liberated from the constraints of traditional paternalistic and hierarchical family relationships. Like many aspects of China's modernisation, changes in gender relations and women's roles in the family and society were pioneered by Western missionaries dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century and then taken over by increasingly progressive, even radical, indigenous Chinese movements of a secular and patriotic nature. It is perhaps to be expected that one of the most influential and prolific indigenous Chinese preachers of the Republican era, Wang Mingdao, would touch on matters of gender and family in his numerous writings and sermons. Western and Chinese scholarship on Wang has with good reason focused exclusively on the apologetic aspect of Wang's ministry, his polemics against modernist theology and his resistance to the Chinese Communist regime in the 1950s.¹ Yet, a significant, albeit smaller, portion of his writings and preaching emphasised practical Christian living. A Christ-centered life was to Wang the sum and substance of the genuineness of a person's profession of faith or conversion, which encompassed marriage, as well as relationships

¹See, for example, Wing-hung Lam, *Wong Ming-Tao and the Chinese Church* (Hong Kong: China Graduate School of Theology, 1982), and Thomas Alan Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao's Stand for the Persecuted Church in China* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2002).

with family, neighbours, co-workers, and people of the opposite sex. In *Wang Mingdao Wenku*, a seven-volume collection of Wang's sermons and writings, there are a total of twenty-one articles, sermons, or allegorical stories dealing specifically with women, marriage, gender or family relations: six from the 1930s, fourteen from the 1940s and one from 1950. They span Wang's most productive years, and some deal with issues specific to China's dramatic social changes in the Republican era, such as concubinage and widowhood. One sees in Wang's writings and sermons on marriage, gender and family relations a concrete example of the indigenisation of Christianity in China, a process complicated by China's encounter with Western modernity.

Protestant missionary work in the nineteenth century played a pioneering role in many aspects of China's modernisation through the establishment of schools, hospitals and clinics, as well as the translation of Western works into Chinese. It was also the catalyst, both intentional and inadvertent, of significant changes in the conditions of women and gender relations through the establishment of girls' schools, role models of Western female missionaries, and advocacy against the cruel practice of foot-binding. As Jessie Lutz observes in her introduction to *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women: Gender, Christianity, and Social Mobility*, 'The history of Christianity in China is part of the history of the empowerment of Chinese women.'² Although women in traditional Chinese society were not entirely without agency, both Lutz's edited volume and the three-volume *Salt and Light* series edited by Carol Hamrin and Stacey Bieler³ chronicle the lives of Chinese Christian women whose extraordinary achievements greatly surpassed the traditional roles available to women in China. Whereas Christian missionaries and missionary reformers often targeted specific practices such as foot-binding and brought about other subtle changes in the fate of women, mainly through the creation of previously

²Jessie Gregory Lutz, 'Introduction', in *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women: Gender, Christianity, and Social Mobility*, edited by Jessie Gregory Lutz (Bethlehem, Penn.: Lehigh University Press, 2010), 22.

³Carol Lee Hamrin and Stacey Bieler, eds, *Salt and Light: (More) Lives of Faith that Shaped Modern China*, 3 vols. (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2009-2011).

unavailable opportunities for women, May Fourth writers launched direct and wholesale attacks on the whole system of the Confucian family structure through their prolific fictional and non-fictional works. Several essays by one of China's first Communist intellectuals Chen Duxiu⁴ and the novels of leftist writer Pa Chin⁵ are salient examples. Just as missionary and Chinese Christian reformers of the late nineteenth century were pushed aside by subsequent indigenous revolutionary movements, the pioneering role of missionaries and Chinese Christians in bringing about changes in Chinese conceptions of womanhood was eclipsed by the New Culture and May Fourth Movements. Wang Mingdao's sermons and writings were situated in this context of profound social changes that had been set in motion by the Protestant missionary movement dating back to the nineteenth century. By Wang's time, however, China's social transformation had been taken even further by New Culture and May Fourth Advocacy.

Wang's sermons and writings on marriage, women, and gender often took the form of practical responses to specific questions, problems or issues. Of the six articles or sermons on issues of gender or marriage, one was entitled, 'Should Those with Concubines Be Accepted by the Church When They Repent and Believe in the Lord?' (1934),⁶ and another, 'Why Doesn't God Allow Those Who Belong to Him Marry Unbelievers?' (1939).⁷ One article, 'A Few Words about Marriage' (1932),⁸ addressed the issue of marriage in a general fashion. Another exhorted the faithful to avoid the pitfall of sexual sin: 'Keep Far Away from Temptation' (1935).⁹ Whereas marriage, including marriage of believers to

⁴Chen's essays advocating the liberation of women include 'The Women's Question and Socialism' [Nüzi wenti yu shehui zhuyi] and 'Why do we advocate the labor movement and the women's movement?' [Women weishenme yao tichang laodong yundong yu funü yundong], which are collected in volume 2 of *Sanlian shudian*, ed., *Chen Duxiu wenzhang xuanbian*, 3 vols. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1984).

⁵Pa Chin's *Family* (1931), the first part of a trilogy entitled *Turbulent Stream*, is the best known and was widely read by Chinese young people of the era; it offers a scathing critique of the traditional Chinese family.

⁶Wang Mingdao, 'Youqie de ren huigai xinzhu keyi bei jiaohui jiena ma?' in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, ed. Wang Zhengzhong (Taiwan: Jinxuan chubanshe, 1976), 220-9.

⁷Wang Mingdao, 'Weishenme Shen buxu shutaderen he buxinderen jiehun', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 187-198.

⁸Wang Mingdao, 'Guanyu hunyin de jijuhua', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 260-3.

⁹Wang Mingdao, 'Yuanbi shiyou', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 6, ed. Wang Zhengzhong (Taiwan: Jinxuan chubanshe, 1996 reprint), 44-7.

unbelievers, and sexual sin, were not specific to twentieth-century China, as much explicit teaching is found in the Old and New Testaments on these matters, the issue of whether the Church should allow men who had concubines to become members reflected significant changes from the late Qing dynasty to the early Republican era. Even though concubinage was both legal and socially accepted in imperial China, it lost its legal status in the Republic. Yet, the social reality of concubinage did not change; rather, concubines simply fell under the new legal category of ‘household member’.¹⁰ Whereas Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians that believers and unbelievers should not be ‘unequally yoked’ is often taken to be an injunction to believers against entering into marriage with unbelievers, there is no such clear teaching in both the Old and New Testaments concerning concubinage as it was practised in China, and the fact that many Old Testament patriarchs had more than one wife offers little light on the issue. In Imperial China, despite a concubine’s inferior social position to a wife, who was the first woman a man married according to a set of prescribed rites, she nonetheless had legal standing, and her children fathered by her husband were legitimate. Thus, a concubine in Imperial and Republican China cannot be compared in modern terms to a man’s mistress or lover in the West. Wang’s application of Scripture in addressing this context- and culture-specific issue reveals much about him as a Christian leader and offers a concrete example of the indigenisation of Christianity in China. This shall be further examined later.

The decade of the 1940s was especially productive and saw the publication of a total of fourteen articles by Wang on gender and family issues, assuming that the seven volumes of *Wang Mingdao Wenku* are a comprehensive compilation. Here, again, one observes a pragmatic approach of addressing specific questions that must have arisen from ordinary Chinese Christians in Wang’s time. Four articles or sermons — ‘The Biblical View of Marriage’ (1941),¹¹ ‘The Proper Way of Forming Marriage Unions’

¹⁰Lisa Tran, ‘The Concubine in Republican China: Social Perception and Legal Construction’, *Etudes chinoises* 28 (2009): 119-149.

¹¹Wang Mingdao, ‘Shengjing zhong de hunyin guan’, in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 161-72.

(1941),¹² ‘May Christians Divorce?’ (1942),¹³ and ‘Sound Advice for Husbands and Wives’ (1942)¹⁴ — addressed general principles regarding marriage. Two articles or sermons — ‘May Widows Remarry?’ (1942)¹⁵ and ‘Is There Ever a Reason for a Christian to Take A Concubine?’ (1942)¹⁶ — addressed context- and culture-specific issues. Regarding the latter issue, concubinage was legally and socially accepted in traditional China. Regarding the former issue, expectations of female chastity in late Imperial China were such that widows were under strong pressure not to remarry.¹⁷ Even though gender norms were definitely changing in Republican China, the fact that Wang considered the remarriage of widows an issue worth addressing suggests that attitudes and expectations regarding widowhood, like the practice of concubinage, carried over into the Republican period. As will be seen later, in trying to discern principles from Biblical narratives and the explicit teachings of Jesus or the apostles on these matters, Wang necessarily departed from key aspects of traditional norms or ethical rules without embracing all the progressive or revolutionary ideas advocated by May Fourth writers.

The primacy of Scripture was evident in Wang Mingdao’s sermons and articles. Wang’s approach was always to resort to Scripture for precedents and to distill principles from scriptural examples. In the above articles or sermons addressing specific questions or issues, Wang scoured both the Old and New Testaments for principles by which to arrive at answers. In addition, Wang drew moral principles and warnings from a series of character studies, which he wrote to guide his congregation and

¹²Wang Mingdao, ‘Jiehe hunyin de zhenggui’, in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 172-87.

¹³Wang Mingdao, ‘Jidutu keyi lihun ma?’, in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 198-206.

¹⁴Wang Mingdao, ‘Fufu liangzhen’, in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 229-34.

¹⁵Wang Mingdao, ‘Guafu keyi zaijia ma?’, in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 206-12.

¹⁶Wang Mingdao, ‘Jidutu you meiyou liyou keyi naqie’, in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 212-20.

¹⁷Social reality was invariably more complex than the moral ideal. See, for example, Lloyd E. Eastman, *Family, Fields, and Ancestors: Constancy and Change in China’s Social and Economic History, 1550-1949* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 19, 20 & 33.

readers: 'The Lesson Learned from Bathsheba' (1935),¹⁸ 'A Blessed Woman' (1940),¹⁹ 'A Headstrong Woman Who Suffered Calamity' (1941),²⁰ 'A Wise and Sensible Woman' (1942),²¹ 'She Saved Them from a Great Calamity' (1945),²² 'Two Crafty Men and an Ignorant Woman' (1938),²³ and 'One Who Practiced Free Love' (1947).²⁴ In these character studies, the starting point was Scripture rather than a particular question or issue, but the process of discerning practical principles and moral lessons from Scripture was the same.

Wang Mingdao employed three other genres in his teachings on women, albeit with less frequency. One was akin to a pastoral letter, as in 'Sincere Advice to Young Women' (1943).²⁵ Another was a composite story with typical characters as found in parables. 'A Young Woman's Voice of Remorse' (1940)²⁶ and 'A Trickle Unstopped Ultimately Becomes a River' (1943)²⁷ fell into this category. Then, in 1950, when he was fifty years old, Wang wrote a series of articles chronicling his life and ministry up to that time. These were later published in book form under the title, *These Fifty Years*. One

¹⁸Referring to Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, one of King David's generals. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then sent Uriah to the frontline to be killed. Bathsheba later gave birth to Solomon. Wang Mingdao, 'Cong Bashiba suode de jiaoxun', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 6, 48-52.

¹⁹Referring to the mother of Jesus, Mary. Wang Mingdao, 'Yige youfu de nüzi', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 6, 121-3.

²⁰Referring to Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian servant, who bore Abraham a son, Ishmael. Wang Mingdao, 'Yige renxing quhuo de nüzi', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 6, 150-4.

²¹Referring to Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Wang Mingdao, 'Yige mingzhi de nüzi', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 6, 155-7.

²²Referring to the 'wise woman of Abel of Beth-maacah' whose name is not given but who saved the city from destruction by negotiating with Joab to spare the city in exchange for Sheba's head. Joab had besieged the city in an effort to quell Sheba's rebellion against King David (2 Samuel 20: 14-22). Wang Mingdao, 'Ta jiu tamen tuolile yichang dahuo', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 6, 221-8.

²³Referring to the rape of Tamar, King David's daughter, by King David's son Amnon, who was assisted by Jonadab in the scheme that led to the rape. Wang Mingdao, 'Liangge jiaozhade nanren he yige wuzhide nüzi', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 50-63.

²⁴Referring to Samson, who successively fell in love with a Philistine woman, a prostitute of Gaza, and Delilah. Wang Mingdao, 'Yige shixing ziyou lian'ai de ren', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 39-49.

²⁵Wang Mingdao, 'Zhonggao qingniande nüzimen', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 32-8.

²⁶Wang Mingdao, 'Yige qingnian nüzide huisheng', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 64-72.

²⁷Wang Mingdao, 'Juanjuan bu yong zhong wei jianghe', in *Wang Mingdao wenku*, Vol. 1, 73-84.

of the articles, which subsequently became a chapter in the book, was a candid portrayal of his own marriage.²⁸

The issues that Wang Mingdao sought to address fully reflected the cultural and social changes then taking place in China, and his sincere effort to seek counsel from Scripture precluded a simple return to traditional Confucian norms, despite a temperament very much shaped by the Chinese classics. In the 1930s article 'The Lesson Learned from Bathsheba', for example, Wang compared the 'modern' women of his time to Bathsheba, who, because she bathed in a place that allowed her to be seen by others, became the cause of David's fall:

Although the modern women of our time do not bathe in places where they can be seen by others, their power in tempting men to sin might well exceed Bathsheba's. In recent years, one of the things most offensive to our eyes has been the many young modern women doing all they can to expose their bodies.²⁹

In the 1940s article 'Sincere Advice to Young Women', Wang speaks of the snares that young women faced as a result of the dramatic social changes occurring in early twentieth-century China, especially in their relations with the opposite sex:

The women of our day have been liberated from the secluded family. They enter schools to study. They go freely to the homes of classmates; there they meet the uncles, brothers, and [other] men among the friends and relatives of classmates. Some schools have adopted a co-educational system, and female students can have contact with many male students without setting foot beyond the school gate. When there is no homework, and during school breaks, they go to entertainment venues to amuse themselves ... They [the young women] only know this to be an advantage given them by the times, but they do not know how to avoid danger; ... what do they know of the sinister craftiness and hypocrisy of the human heart?³⁰

In these articles, one sees the clash between old China and new China in women's fashion as well as in the norms of acceptable social interaction. Although Wang came of age in the era of the May Fourth Movement, he was not one of the May Fourth intellectuals, and apparently was not a May Fourth

²⁸Wang Mingdao, 'Woyao wei ta zao yige pei'ou bangzhu ta [I will make a spouse for him to help him]', Chapter 7, in Wang Mingdao, *Wushinian lai*, 12th edition (Hong Kong: Bellman House Publishers, 2005), 183-210.

²⁹Wang Mingdao, 'Cong Bashiba suode de jiaoxun', 50-1.

³⁰Wang Mingdao, 'Zhonggao qingniande nüzimen', 33.

adherent either. He was especially cautious in his views about the new norms of social interaction between men and women. In fact, his articles and sermons often warned unwitting young women against romance or free love [ziyou lian'ai], one of the key themes of May Fourth literature.

In addition to his cautious attitude toward easy romance, Wang Mingdao's most significant departure from the May Fourth ideals was his reticence on the 'oppressive patriarchal Confucian family'. Yet, even though he did not criticise the old Confucian society, he never advocated a return to the old days either. In fact, he counselled parents against the simplistic approach of not allowing their daughters to receive a modern education for the sake of protecting them from the dangers of intermingling with the opposite sex:

Some simple-minded parents, when they see this situation, refuse to allow their daughters to be educated in schools, imposing many restrictions on them, putting them under close watch, and forbidding them to meet and interact with men ... [I]n this era of general enlightenment, if parents insist on refusing to allow their daughters to be educated in schools, not only will the daughters refuse to obey, but even if they willingly obey, where can these uneducated women go in the future? Not only does society have no place for them, but it is to be feared that even better families will not accept them [as daughters-in-law].³¹

As for female fashion, another area of dramatic change in Republican China, Wang exhorted his female readers to be 'in the world but not of the world':

One can say nothing about the lifestyle of unbelievers, and I do not reproach them ...

Sisters who belong to Christ, you should come out from among them and be set apart from them. Not only be set apart from the people of the world in all conduct, but also be set apart from them in dress and adornment. We would rather be mocked as behind the times and not be praised as stylish. You should do so for the sake of glorifying God. You should do so also for the sake of not causing others to sin. You should do so especially for the sake of keeping yourselves from many dangers and snares.

The overturned carts ahead are a mirror to those that follow. May God cause us never to forget the lesson from Bathsheba!³²

³¹Wang Mingdao, 'Zhonggao qingniande nüzimen', 34.

³²Wang Mingdao, 'Cong Bashiba suode de jiaoxun', 51-2.

Here the emphasis was not on a return to the old but on separation from 'the ways of the world', a recurrent theme in Wang's teachings on the Christian life.

Perhaps no single culture- and context-specific issue illustrated both Wang Mingdao's faithfulness to Scripture and his pastoral heart more than the issue of concubinage. Since the new legal category of 'household member' did not change the social reality of concubinage in Republican China, how was the Chinese church to regard men and women in such relationships, especially those among them who converted after entering such relationships? In the article 'May Those with Concubines Be Accepted by the Church When They Repent and Believe in the Lord?' Wang exhibited surprising flexibility and sensitivity while remaining faithful to Scripture. In countering the arguments of 'purists' who argued that the converted men must send away their concubines, Wang spoke movingly of the predicament of these women given the social reality of Republican China:

If they [the concubines] were virgins, they could marry. If they were widows, they could remarry. But in their current situation, they are neither virgins nor widows. They have already lived with men but are now abandoned. They can neither return to live with the men who had taken them as concubines nor remarry. If we do not put ourselves in their place, we will never know what it means to be in such a situation.³³

Wang reminded his readers not to forget that concubines were human beings and 'not made of wood and stone', and that they had emotional and physical needs like other women.³⁴ After laying out various Christian positions on this issue and pointing out the impracticability or injustice of each, Wang proposed that those already in relations of concubinage when they converted should remain in the status quo, and that the Chinese church should accept them as full communicant members but not allow them to be in any position of leadership. Wang's position might have seemed surprising to those who knew his reputation as an indefatigable defender of Biblical authority and a man of utmost integrity. Unsurprisingly, it was to Scripture that he resorted, citing Romans 2:3 (forbidding divorce); 1

³³Wang Mingdao, 'Youqie de ren huigai xinzhu keyi bei jiaohui jiena ma?', 221.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 221.

Timothy 3:2, 12 (on church leadership); Titus 1:5-6 (also on church leadership); and Deuteronomy 22:28-29 (on a man's obligation to marry a woman whom he violated). After finding no clear command for divorcing a concubine but clear prohibition against divorce, Wang came to the position that unless a concubine willingly left her Christian husband and was in no moral and material danger, she should continue to live with her husband in the same household.³⁵ In fact, Wang argued for the full acceptance of converted men and women in situations of concubinage by the Chinese church based on Jesus' acceptance of tax collectors and prostitutes. But he was equally adamant that a Christian should never enter into concubinage after conversion and a Christian man with a concubine was not qualified to lead the church regardless of his ability. He ended his discussion of the issue with a final exhortation directed at Chinese Christians who were not in the thorny situation of concubinage:

In conclusion, let me say again to all the saints who love the Lord, not only should we accept those who have sincerely repented and believed in the Lord but have concubines or are concubines, but we must not have the slightest hint or attitude of contempt toward them. Because of their shortcoming they are easily ashamed and embarrassed (especially women who are concubines); if we have the slightest prejudice toward them, we can easily cause them to stumble and backslide. We should follow the Lord's pattern of not snuffing out the smoldering wick and not breaking the crushed reed. ... [T]his is fulfilling the law of love.³⁶

These words reveal the often overlooked but tender and pastoral side of Wang Mingdao, which was not exhibited in his rhetorical battles with theological modernists in the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the early twentieth century. One can fairly say that Wang Mingdao was not specifically interested in the women's question, as several May Fourth writers were explicitly. In fact, it is more accurate to portray his sermons and writings on gender-related issues as part of his overall teaching on how to live 'holy and blameless lives' as people who profess the name of Christ, ranging from family relations to work and social relations — in short, on mundane matters such as the public and private

³⁵*Ibid.*, 222-3.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 228-9.

conduct of professing Christians, all stemming from his overarching concern for the purity and faithful witness of the Church.

Thus, in his own way, Wang Mingdao engaged with issues that were important to the Chinese of the May Fourth era and after. In doing so, he did not ride the May Fourth tide, even though he was shaped by the many social changes it produced. Of equal significance was Wang Mingdao's departure from traditional Chinese norms as he worked out the implications of the Christian faith for his personal life. Wang's most intimate writings on matters of marriage and family relations appeared in the articles of the series later collected as chapters in his autobiography, *The Fifty Years*. In 'I Will Make a Spouse for Him to Help Him', Wang candidly revealed his vulnerable side: weighing the pros and cons of married life as opposed to celibacy in his late twenties, meeting his future wife and her parents, and the internal dynamics of his family after his wedded wife entered the home he shared with his mother and sister. The revolutionary nature of this kind of writing in China can be seen in his preface to *The Fifty Years*, and in the fact that he found it necessary to explain his 'exposure' of such family details:

In Beijing there is a common saying: 'A family's dirty laundry cannot be aired outside.' These misunderstandings, suspicions, quarrels, and disagreements in the home are not matters to be proud of, especially as these things involve my mother, who loves and nurtures me, and my sister born of the same parents. Humanly speaking, not only should I not recount these things, but I should do my best to conceal them even if someone should mention them. But since I am a servant of God, I should no longer consider [what is natural] humanly speaking but instead receive God's call like a prophet ... God once used familial trials especially to shape me, edify me, chisel me, and sculpt me, causing me to benefit from suffering. These precious experiences must not be kept to myself, so that the many saints who are sorely tried in their families may receive encouragement and comfort.³⁷

In his deep affection for his widowed mother and older sister, despite the many ways they made his marriage and family life difficult, Wang revealed himself to be a Confucian, the antithesis of May Fourth critiques against the traditional Chinese family. However, in the way that he learned to treat his wife with respect and understanding, despite the many personality differences between them, Wang also

³⁷Wang Mingdao, 'Preface', in *Wushinian lai*, vi.

exhibited values and virtues not expected in traditional China. His concluding remarks concerning his marriage and spouse are both candid and moving:

I have been married to my wife for almost twenty-two years. Even though we have been through a long period of friction in the past, we have nevertheless always trusted each other. We do not lie to each other and harbor no suspicion toward one another. There is nothing between us that we hide from each other ...

My ideal wife used to be a woman with literary talent, so that she could be my secretary. Contrary to my expectations, my wife has no such talent; even for a moderately important letter in the classical style, she needs me to start a draft for her, but sometimes she proofreads my manuscripts. She cannot preach, but she can tell me where my meaning or wording is not entirely appropriate after I give a sermon. She is not a capable housewife, but she is a good co-worker; she is not a skillful secretary in my office, but she is a meticulous 'proofreader' of my life and work. She is not the 'ideal wife' I envisioned in the past, but she is my most suitable spouse today ... I believe even more firmly in what God says:

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts' (Isaiah 55: 8-9).³⁸

A man in traditional China whose wife did not submit to him and please him from the outset of their marriage would never say these words of praise about her. Here was a man whose marriage was shaped by both difficult family dynamics and his love and respect for Scripture. The outcome was a new ideal marriage, neither that advocated by May Fourth writers nor that prescribed by Confucian patriarchy.

This relatively small but important portion of Wang Mingdao's sermons and writings spans his entire ministry before his imprisonment in the 1950s and opens a window to the indigenisation of Christianity in China. It offers a glimpse into what Scripture meant to one Chinese Christian as he wrestled with the profound social changes and the thorny relational issues of his day. Given Wang's stature among Chinese Christians in the Republican era and beyond, one can surmise that the writings and sermons examined here were both a picture of and a catalyst for profound social and cultural changes in modern China. In the encounter between Scripture and real life experiences, the eternal Word is made flesh throughout the ages. As pioneering historian of world Christianity Lamin Sanneh

³⁸Wang Mingdao, 'Woyao wei ta zao yige pei'ou bangzhu ta', 210; quotation marks not in the original.

points out, the Christian tradition was birthed in the interaction between the Jewish origin of the faith and the surrounding Hellenistic culture of the Roman Empire.³⁹ According to Sanneh, even though the first Christians were committed and observant Jews,

Paul envisioned for Hellenistic Christians a continuation of Hellenistic social and personal patterns of life and thought, with Christianity in its Jewish temper challenging and upsetting the pagan premises of those patterns. This would effect a radical change where necessary, but only from within, with Christians engaging the implications of their faith in closest proximity to the ideas and institutions of their society.

Thus, in the example of Wang Mingdao's teachings on family relations and his commentary on the rapidly changing social norms of Republican China, one sees a Chinese Christian leader working out the implications of his Christian faith within the context of the ideas, practices and institutions of his day. The process that had begun in the earliest days of Christianity in the Roman Empire continued in the twentieth century in Republican China, contributing to the radical changes taking place in modern Chinese society.

³⁹Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-12.