

Chengdu: Long Live Auntie Wei

When Wang Yi addressed his congregation, he looked like an explorer surveying new horizons. He would grasp his pulpit with both hands, leaning forward on the balls of his feet, his eyes squinting through thick glasses as if focusing on a speck in the distance. He had rosy cheeks and a winning smile, and when he spoke, it was in a strong and forceful voice, his words as clear as his arguments. Earlier in life, he had been a popular blogger on cinema and had written two books analyzing Hollywood and European movies. Trained in law, he had also been one of China's most prominent civil rights lawyers before the government detained or drove most of those people out of their profession. By the time that happened early in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Wang Yi had already found a new calling. He had converted to Christianity in 2005 and founded Early Rain Reformed Church, quickly establishing himself as one of China's best-known preachers. His church was independent of government control, but that made it all the more dynamic. Videos of his sermons circulated on social media. His plans, ideas, and ambitions seemed boundless. Protestant Christianity was China's fastest-growing religion, and Wang Yi was one of its stars.

But at times he had been accused of arrogance and talking over people's heads, of giving theoretical sermons about theological issues that no one could understand. Like most Chinese pastors, he was mostly self-taught in the Bible and tended to bring his lawyer's argumentative nature to church matters. In 2011, he had kicked one of his closest associates out of his church, saying his advocacy of an equal role for women risked allowing "Satan" into the church.

Tonight, though, was a chance to shine. Behind him on a screen

was a picture of a dead woman whom people had come to mourn. She deserved more than an abstract talk. Her name was Wei Suying, a popular member of the church, known to everyone as Auntie Wei. She had died of cancer at age sixty-two, leaving two daughters and two infant grandchildren. Her family had come to the funeral, as well as many church members eager to show their solidarity. The service had started out with a touching slide show of her life. Then her daughters testified about how she had persuaded them to convert to Christianity. Both said how it had changed their lives, helping them see through the materialism of contemporary society. They had become better people, less obsessed with money, and more concerned about helping others. A few people began sobbing; her death had been sudden, and the grief was raw.

Now it was Wang Yi's turn. A few hours earlier, he had been thinking about how the Communists exalt famous people by saying *wansui*, or long live, like "Long Live Chairman Mao." *Wansui* (*wan-sway*) was a term everyone in China knew. It was almost a prefix before the Communist Party's name, a formulaic chant meant to guarantee that its rule would never end. Auntie Wei's death made him realize how much he hated that term. It was an offense to God and to ordinary people like Auntie Wei, whose lives truly deserved exaltation. Talking about this was a bit abstract, but he thought it might work. He stood up to speak, as usual without notes. He started softly, forcing everyone to listen carefully.

"Auntie Wei was someone I think it would be fair to call a simple woman. She was a mother and had a hard life. She raised two daughters mostly on her own. Her husband had died young." One of the daughters began sobbing. People in the church began nodding but caught themselves as Wang Yi continued.

"She was not someone who heard the word *wansui* too often. If she heard it, she would have thought it applied to China, or the Communist Party, or Chairman Mao. *Wansui*: that's almost always reserved for them. This is wrong. *Wansui*, this word, if it belongs to anyone, it belongs to Auntie Wei." A couple of people looked up startled.

"I tell you that she can hear *wansui* now because she is *wansui*; she is immortal because of Jesus. It's not the government that can confer this word. It's God, and it's us by how we live our daily lives. It's the

choices we make despite the immoral society we live in. This is what real *wansui* is. It's nothing that the Communist Party can provide. It's something we can make ourselves."

Suddenly people were smiling; this was why they came to Early Rain Reformed Church. It was different from the anodyne churches sponsored by the state. It was warm and direct, but most of all it was relevant. It was for people who didn't want the status quo, who were searching for alternatives to the life around them. Wang Yi was dressed in a suit, with short cropped hair and an earnest expression—a nice, modern young man, a perfect son-in-law. And yet here he was standing in front of them, telling them directly how to challenge the official way of looking at their country.

When I had visited Old Mr. Ni in Beijing a few weeks earlier, he had also described religion as a kind of immortality, but one that was achieved through private faith and recognition from the community. In Shanxi, the *yinyang* man Li Bin was also part of this world of rituals, even as he faced demands from city people for something fresher and newer. Here in churches across China, this push for a modern spirituality was probably furthest along. It was a direct relationship with God, unmediated, that didn't shy away from political implications.

"Auntie Wei was one of our sisters," Wang Yi said, winding up his eulogy. "We loved her. But it's she who possesses eternal life, not the government. She created it for herself by living a good life, by being our sister in the church, and resisting the immorality around her."

Now I could see why Wang Yi had made the choice to become a pastor. When he was a public intellectual, most of his words were censored. But here, speaking to one hundred people in a room, he was helping a grieving family and also teaching the congregation how to live a different life. He was contributing to a sense that it was ordinary people who possessed real power in a country where all authority seemed to belong to the state.

After the service, a son-in-law of Auntie Wei's walked up to Wang Yi and did something Chinese almost never do: he hugged him. And Wang Yi, blinking back his own tears, looked bewildered but then happy. This was truly his flock, and he was their pastor.

Wang Yi's church is located in Chengdu, capital of the vast, mountain-ringed province of Sichuan. The terrain makes it hard to reach and for centuries has isolated Sichuan from the rest of China. Nowadays, highways and rail lines cut through the mountains, and airlines serve its cities, but the region is still the most remote big concentration of Chinese in the country; to its north and west is the Tibetan plateau, while the south is dominated by the historically tribal lands of Yunnan. Sichuan produced some of China's best-known poets, painters, officials, and soldiers, but a feeling remains of being apart from the big cities to the east. It is as if the mountains and distances and history diminish the laws and orders and rules promulgated in the faraway capital.

You can sense this in Chengdu's street life. Beijing is defined by walls—the Great Wall to its north, the sentries around the leadership compound in the Forbidden City, and the *butongs*, lined with walls, behind which daily life plays out. Chengdu lives outdoors, especially in its teahouses. Some are noisy, public spaces in big parks or temples. Others are simply a slew of tables and chairs strewn under a canopy of trees. Most are quiet storefronts found on almost every block, where regulars come and go at various times of the day, chatting with friends and discussing the latest news and gossip.

Chengdu percolates with an argumentative air that is different from the cautious, curtained world of Beijing. It has the biggest group of thinkers and dissidents outside the capital, and during periods of unrest, such as the 1989 protests, it had the second-most-tumultuous rallies. Nowadays it is China's capital of alternative lifestyles, with a thriving gay scene, hippie communes, and independent history museums. Its cuisine is peppery, its countryside lush, and its people libertarian.

For a while, Chengdu became my second home. As I followed the Moon Year and its unfolding cycle, I lived there for weeks at a time, finding a lively counterpoint to the rural life of Li Bin's Yanggao County and a valuable corrective to the incestuous world of Beijing and its hyper-politicized life. In the capital, government policies were so amplified that they took on an importance they did not deserve as predictors of China's future. In Chengdu, Chinese society was unfolding at its own pace, and predictions of a new totalitarianism seemed less likely.

Two weeks after the Lunar New Year festival ended with the burning pyres in Li Bin's hometown, the second month of the New Year was upon us. This year, it coincided with the beginning of Lent, the solemn forty-day period of fasting and prayer leading up to Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection during Easter.

Lent starts on a Wednesday—Ash Wednesday—when people used to paint crosses on their foreheads with ashes. The day before is known as Shrove Tuesday. As kids growing up in a Protestant household, my sister and I marked the holiday by eating pancakes. The idea was to use up butter and other luxuries before Lent, when people were supposed to prepare for Easter by giving up things they liked—dessert, alcohol, or tobacco—or by praying each day. In Catholic countries, the holiday is even more important, known in some places as Mardi Gras, or Carnival—an almost *Yuanxiao*-type street festival of purging at the start of a new season.

But in Chinese Christian communities, this religious calendar was unfamiliar. Lent? No one in Wang Yi's church knew the Chinese word for it, *dazhaijie*. Finally, I found one church member who was taking a course in theology. He said, yes, he knew it, but it seemed as if I were speaking in Aramaic.

On Ash Wednesday, I visited the church to meet some friends. Early Rain looked different from most churches I have known, a function of its strange legal status. China does have churches with steeples and stained glass, but most were built by missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since the Communist takeover in 1949, these established churches—Catholic and Protestant—have been run by the government.

Early Rain was not part of that world of official religion. It was an unregistered church, which are sometimes called “house churches” or “underground churches.” In the past, those terms made sense because these congregations usually met in people's homes or somewhere in secret. But increasingly, churches like Early Rain are big and public. In fact, these unregistered churches make up about half of China's fifty to sixty million Protestants, forming one of those gray areas that defines much of religious life in China. Like the temples on Miaofengshan that were rebuilt in the 1980s, Early Rain wasn't permitted but also wasn't banned. The government knew it existed but wasn't prepared to close it down. It operated openly but couldn't

buy a plot of land to build a proper church. That forced Early Rain and hundreds of other unregistered churches across China to find space in buildings like the River Trust Mansion.

The mansion was actually a seedy office tower in an older part of Chengdu near the Jinjiang River. It was dank and covered with tiles, and only one elevator usually worked. In 2009, the church bought several rooms on the nineteenth floor as a place to hold services, but police officers barred members from entering. The congregation met at a park along the Jinjiang River for several weeks. Eventually, the authorities let the church take possession of its office floor. The reasons are still unclear: perhaps officials feared the repercussions of alienating hundreds of mostly white-collar professionals, or perhaps they would only take such a drastic step if instructed from Beijing and never got a directive. In any case, since then the church has been housed in the River Trust Mansion—invisible to the public but the center of spiritual life for hundreds of people in Chengdu.

The church occupied half of the nineteenth floor. The biggest room was where the congregation met on Sunday, but this only sat about 150 so the service was video streamed into an adjoining room where another 70 people sat. A second service in the afternoon took care of another 100 or so. There was no stained glass, no wooden pews, and only a simple lectern serving as the pulpit. But the church pulsed with energy all week long. People came to buy books, or meet friends, study the Bible, pray, or organize to help victims of human rights abuses. As the year unfolded, they would set up a seminary, launch a campaign to challenge the government's birth-control policy, form an alliance with other like-minded parishes, and establish a second place of worship in another part of Chengdu.

The only indication of these ambitions was Early Rain's green-and-white logo on the wall by the entrance: a cross sheltering two people, a symbol of how the church saw its role in Chinese society. Next to this logo was a corridor adorned with a time line of Protestant Christian history, one that was sharply at odds with the government's version of the past. It began conventionally enough in 1384, with the publication of John Wycliffe's English-language Bible, and then moved to Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other great figures from church history.

When the chart reached the twentieth century, the white faces gave way to a more diverse array of people, and the story began to become more subversive. Some of the figures portrayed included Wang Mingdao, the revered preacher who spent decades in the Communists' gulag for refusing to join the official church. Closer to the end was Stephen Tong, an ethnic Chinese revivalist preacher from Indonesia whose lectures are popular in the Chinese-speaking world. None of these people were recognized by China's government-run church but instead formed an alternative history emphasizing the independence of Chinese Christianity. The government-run media sometimes presents Christianity as a foreign faith; here, the religion was portrayed as indigenous as in any other country.

On this Ash Wednesday morning, I walked past the faces on the wall, turned left, and saw that Wang Yi was in his office. He looked up and waved me in. As always, he was disarmingly frank. I asked him about his plans to set up a seminary. The idea made me nervous, and I wondered how he felt. Had the government approved that?

"Well, no, they won't approve it, but the question is if they'll shut it down. We don't think so. They asked us if it's internal, and we said yes, so they seemed okay with that."

"So the idea is that it's only to train Early Rain church members," I said. "But will they go out to preach?"

"Definitely; the idea is people from here will become missionaries. They'll learn here."

"But isn't this a sensitive year? You know . . ." I trailed off, wondering if his office was bugged.

"You mean the big leadership issue?" Wang asked with a twinkle in his eye. "Every year is something special. Last year was some anniversary, and a few years ago were the Olympics. Next year will be something else. Right now the Communist Party is not so stable. We can't know what is going on inside. They may feel they need quiet at all costs, and we'll have trouble. Or they could also say that they need quiet so will ignore us; after all, we're not challenging them. Or they may be too preoccupied with their struggles to notice us. It's hard to say. We just trust in God and let Him decide."

As we were talking, a policeman walked in. I thought at first it was just one of the many workers or deliverymen in China who sometimes wear blue uniforms. Then I noticed the insignia. Wang Yi

stood up, greeting the officer warmly by name, and quickly led him out. Ten minutes later, Wang Yi returned.

"The local police officer. He comes every week to get the list of those who attended church. We give them this information; we have nothing to hide, and the congregants are okay with that too. In fact, it's a precondition for joining our church. You have to give your name, address, and contact information and be willing for us to share it with the authorities. We don't want to be stuck in the old underground-church mentality. It's not healthy."

He pointed to a whiteboard on the wall, which was covered with notes and numbers. "There's the figure for the Sunday morning service: 222. And the afternoon: 92. So the total was 314. We can only seat around 220, so that's why we have the second service."

I asked about Lent.

"It's hardly celebrated here at all. We had this break in our history—you know, the missionaries being expelled in 1949 and then the antireligious campaigns—so a lot has been lost. A lot of people don't really know too much about Lent. We had a service trying to reintroduce the idea and explain it, but there's very little celebration. Nothing on Shrove Tuesday or Ash Wednesday."

I later realized it was more than Lent; the church calendar itself was hardly known. But at the same time, Chinese Christians often rejected the traditional lunar calendar. At most, they might celebrate Chinese New Year, but the other festivals and holidays were treated as pagan.

We talked about my upbringing and how in my family we marked Lent by eating simply. My mother used to make a big show of giving up dessert for Lent. We knew she was partly motivated by wanting to lose weight, and we joked about whether she could last the forty days until Easter. But the effect was real: we did think about Lent and were aware of it. It was hard to convey the naturalness of this; it was cultural and not learned formally. Some Chinese Christians envied this, while others rejected it in a fundamentalist way. To them, all that mattered was reading the Bible. The good book didn't tell people to eat pancakes or put ashes on their foreheads, so these were as irrelevant as the fires of *Yuanxiao*. But an increasing number of churches were like Wang Yi's. They wanted all the traditions and imported them as a package, assembling them like a model airplane.

"You'll find that Christmas is the biggest difference," Wang Yi said. "In the West, you celebrate at home with your family. Not us. For us it's too good an opportunity to proselytize. We try to bring people to the church—to get members to invite friends and have a big celebration. Many churches in Chengdu have over one thousand people at the services, even though they might just have a couple of hundred regular worshippers. Christmas will be quite different from what you're used to."

In a little room near the front door was the church's library and bookstore. Its walls were lined with glass cabinets holding magazines published by unregistered churches, or reference works, such as various translations of the Bible or primers in classical Greek. In the center of the room was a table with a display of about fifty books on Christianity, many of them translated works of charismatic American pastors. Wang Yi's sermons were on sale too. These talks were what had initially drawn me to Early Rain. Although they were long—forty-five minutes was the norm—they were among the best I had heard in any language, and I dreamed of having them translated and posted online. Wang Yi was fast on his feet, referring to verses from the Bible that we had read earlier in the service, while also inserting current events and humor. He created a coherent and orderly world in contrast to the one racing blindly by on Chengdu's streets outside.

I wondered how long he could continue preaching before he would get in trouble. It wasn't really his sermons that made me wonder. Instead, it was that his church was a parallel realm outside the party's control. It had its own nursery school, day care, seminary, and elementary school—all located on this floor that it owned. It handled its own finances, rejecting all foreign money. It held its own elections and annual meetings—just like the government's, but more transparent and inspiring. The Beijing social commentator Li Fan once wrote a monograph on Christianity in China declaring that China's unregistered churches were the only real example of civil society—in other words, organizations independent of government control that tried to change or improve society.

This was clearest in Early Rain's social work. Independent ac-

tivism is anathema to the government, which worries that even innocent-sounding groups might morph into something political. This is not as far-fetched as it seems. In 2008, Sichuan was hit by a terrible earthquake that left thousands dead. Spontaneously, people across China volunteered to help or send money. But they quickly noticed that the first buildings to collapse had been schools. Critics such as the Chengdu activist Tan Zuoren began to ask pointed questions about corrupt building practices, a theme amplified by the Beijing activist-artist Ai Weiwei. What had started as charity had transformed into something political. Within weeks of the earthquake, most independent helpers had been sent home, and Tan was later locked up.

Early Rain, however, persisted. Wang Yi's congregation set up charities to help street people and even families of political prisoners. The church claimed it wasn't siding with the prisoners, just acting from purely humanitarian grounds. That was probably true, but it was skating close to the edge.

As I sat flipping through Wang Yi's sermons and books, a friend stopped by. He was Zhang Guoqing, a local businessman in his late forties, still not married but hoping to find a Christian wife. He was always busy with work, which involved setting up concerts, conferences, and big public events. That and his heavy involvement in Early Rain had left him single. He often spoke to me longingly about finding a *duxiang*—a partner, someone to share the joys and trials of life. For now, the church filled his time, and he was its unofficial liaison with every thinker in town, as well as the *guobao* security agents who kept watch.

"You need to understand Chengdu a bit better if you want to write about it," he said to me. "You want to meet Ran Yunfei?"

The famous author and blogger who had been detained in 2011 for retweeting something about the Jasmine Revolution in North Africa? Authorities had held him for six months without trial before finally releasing him. Since then, he had been under close watch. I nodded vigorously. Of course I was interested.

"His wife is a member of Early Rain. We're old friends, and of course Ran and Pastor Wang are old buddies. We know him well. We'll go early to avoid the *guobao*," Zhang said. "I'll pick you up at 7:00."

I laughed. "The *guobao* doesn't start work until after 7:00?" I had thought that state security worked round the clock.

"This is Sichuan! And it's just old Ran. But you're right, 6:30. No, 6:00. He won't be expecting us."

"The *guobao* or Ran? Are you sure he wants to see us?"

Zhang laughed and slapped me on the back. "For me, he'll do anything. We're brothers."

"Christians?"

"Ran isn't exactly a Christian, but he's like one. See you tomorrow."

Ran Yunfei lived in an old Communist-style apartment complex from the 1950s, a series of low-slung buildings made of brick but crumbling like an old temple. It was canopied by ginkgo trees that seemed to have been planted centuries earlier. They enveloped us, holding in the early morning mist like a rain cloud. We slithered over smooth paving stones, wet and mossy, as morning broke gray and chilly.

This was what was known as a *danwei* apartment complex. Until the 1990s, most Chinese in cities worked for a "work unit," or *danwei*—a company, a government agency, a university—some sort of organization that provided cradle-to-grave benefits. Gradually, the *danwei* system broke down as China adopted market economics. The biggest step was when the government started selling these apartments to their residents in the 1990s, an often underestimated step that gave people a huge sense of freedom. Ran's *danwei* was *Sichuan Literature*, a government-run magazine where he still held a token job writing occasional articles about classical Chinese texts. His *danwei* housing was typical: poor construction, five stories up with no elevator, and extremely dingy. The stairway was dark and littered with junk that people no longer wanted in their homes. Public spaces tended to be like this in China—littering, spitting, and abusing public property were the rule; after all, there was always a migrant laborer to sweep it up.

As Zhang predicted, the *guobao* wasn't around, and Ran wasn't expecting us either. He opened the door of his fifth-floor apartment in his pajamas, stared at us for a second, and burst into a staccato laugh, as if to say, well, if the *guobao* didn't see you, what can I do? He

was a compact man—five feet six—with a shaved head and a dark complexion. A member of the Tujia minority from the mountains near the Yangtze River, he called himself a "bandit"—"you know, short, dark, angry" was how he put it—and he used it as his social media handle: *Tufei Ran*, Bandit Ran. He spoke fast and stuttered, often adding a few *dui, dui, dui*—right, right, right—at the end of his sentences, as if one word couldn't adequately convey his agreement or cover up his doubts. He shook my hand and pulled me into the room, then quickly excused himself to brush his teeth, change his clothes, and put the kettle on.

He lived with his wife and daughter, who were rising to get ready for work and school. They stayed in the back until Ran appeared with our tea and led us up a small internal staircase to the roof of the building, where he had built a glass-walled room that served as an office. It was lined with a wonderful array of books, stacked every which way like games of pick-up sticks. Between the bookshelves were a work desk, sofa, easy chairs, and several large wooden chests that seemed salvaged from a sunken Spanish galleon. As dawn broke, we looked out over the polluted city, its buildings rising from the smog like trees in a misty forest. Objectively, it was ugly, but so abstract that it could have passed for a classical Chinese painting of a mystical landscape.

"You're looking good," Zhang said perkily, as if his friend had just come back from vacation.

"I read lots of the classics in jail. They don't allow the Bible, because it's considered subversive, but they allow the classics, which have a lot of subversive material! Of course they can't read the classics. They don't know. But it was very instructive."

He handed me a small blue book with the picture of a temple on it. It was called *The Lungs of Old Sichuan: The Story of the Temple of Great Charity*, a methodically researched history of one of Chengdu's most famous Buddhist temples. I marveled at the production quality. It was a beautiful paperback, with a rough, textured cover.

"It shows how the monks were attacked after liberation and declared Rightists"—a term used in the Mao era for those who were considered not left-wing enough. "A monk as a Rightist! What nonsense, but that's how it was. It's all in there, but I don't go out of my

way to rub the government's nose in it. It's just stated factually. That's how I like to write books: factually and clearly."

"And you got it published?" I asked him.

"It was in the publisher's warehouse, but after I was released from prison, they wouldn't distribute it. I told this to the *guobao*, and they said, 'You haven't been convicted, so you can publish.' I said, 'Good, so can you tell the publishing house this?' They said, 'No, we can't tell the publisher or else we'll frighten them to death! But you can tell them our views.' So I did and they released the book, but it's not available anywhere. We had a press run of five thousand, and I've sold about two thousand, mostly directly through the temple."

"Why did you pick a Buddhist temple to write about?" I asked. "Are you a believer?"

"No, no, no. Not a Buddhist. But I do have a lot to do with Christianity. My wife is a Christian. I've been influenced by Christian thought through Wang Yi. I'm not a believer, but I'm not an atheist, because I know the value of spirituality. I don't deny the value."

He and Wang Yi were old friends. When Ran had been detained in 2011, Wang had written an emotional, open letter called "Now I Must See My Friend Ran Yunfei Become a Prisoner." The title was darkly humorous. In the past, Wang and Ran had discussed religion so vigorously that Wang Yi had jokingly said that he couldn't stand the idea of Ran becoming a Christian; if Ran did, Wang would see too much of him and they would argue all the more. But now he had to bear a much worse thought: his dear friend behind bars. "I am heartbroken for my country," Wang Yi wrote. "I call out for righteousness."

Ran's wife came up the stairs with a bowl of black peanuts for us to munch on. "You amuse yourselves while I go out." She was polite but weary: her husband was at it again, talking to people he probably should avoid.

We were silent for a minute, and then Ran picked up his train of thought, the ideas coming out rapid fire as he laughed, joked, and satirized the government's view of religion.

"The Communists really destroyed religion. They don't understand it at all. Look at Tibet. I told the *guobao* that they have gone too far. You don't allow the Tibetans to hang pictures of the Dalai Lama. You don't have faith, so you don't understand. So the Tibetans get

very angry and depressed. And then you go into temples and instead hang pictures of Mao. You've gone overboard! This isn't right. Think about it. No wonder they set themselves on fire."

I asked him what else religious groups provide; is it mainly solace?

"No. It's much more. If this government wants China to develop well, it needs faith. It also needs nongovernmental organizations. I've often said that Chinese don't get NGOs. They think it's 'good people doing good works.' But this is wrong. NGOs are necessary because society can't just be the government doing stuff and we either support or oppose it. It has to be us doing stuff on our own, not just reacting to the government. You see what I mean?"

"Churches are like this. The unregistered churches are public spaces. They're maybe the only real public space in China right now. Also, I have to say I've learned to think more clearly thanks to them."

"Churches make you think clearly?" I asked.

"I'm cursed by people online all the time. But I've learned to accept this."

"To turn the other cheek?"

"Yes, or just trying to be civil. I'm like this: I've got rules for arguing. One, I don't care if you curse me. Two, I won't praise you or kiss your ass. Third, I'm magnanimous. I don't fight with the secret police, for example. Of course, we have differences of opinion"—he broke out into guffaws, wiping his mouth to try to recover—"but we discuss things. I don't treat people as enemies. We're polite to each other. Nowadays in China few people don't curse. Public intellectuals are constantly shouting and cursing. That's why public discussion is so trashy in China."

"So why are you writing about education? What does it have to do with this bad public discourse and this lack of spiritual values?"

"You have a society where the educational materials are all about loving the party, so of course it leads to a spiritual crisis."

"I don't get it."

"Everything they teach you to admire is fake. Right now they're pushing Lei Feng again," he said, referring to the Communist hero who for decades has been held up as a model of selflessness.

"But everyone knows that Lei Feng is fake. His story is mostly made up. It's bullshit. He was supposed to be an ordinary soldier, but somehow a Xinhua photographer was there to take perfect pic-

tures of him? And his beautifully written diary? It's an insult to people's intelligence. All of their model heroes are fake: Wang Jie, Liu Wenxue, Lai Ning, fake, fake, fake. So when they teach morality, their teaching tools are fake. Completely fake.

"After a while the students learn that Lei Feng is a fake. This is destructive; it destroys everything you've been taught. You feel that nothing is real. How can they teach virtues? It's impossible. You find out that the things you're supposed to admire the most are fake. So it seems nothing is real. Faith is a foundation, but the government has no foundation: they will say anything or do anything. The only way the party can succeed is by cheating you. That becomes their biggest success—by how much they can cheat you. That's whom you're ruled by."

"How do you combat that?"

"The main thing is you have to learn how to argue. Too few public intellectuals can argue logically in China. They don't learn how to do this, and they end up cursing each other all the time. If there's one thing I've learned from Christianity, it's that one shouldn't curse everyone all the time. I'm a hothead, but I'm trying to calm down. I think it's taught me that. To be rational."

That was an interesting twist. Secularists say religion is irrational, and if they have any sympathy for it, it's as a mystic, illogical part of human life that at best we have to accept. And yet as Old Mr. Ni had also said a few weeks earlier, faith can be a simple proposition: doing good deeds and living a straight life. Wasn't this the universal basis of real happiness?

By contrast, the society that China's radical secularists had set up seemed much more convoluted—not only the fake moral heroes, but even things like Ran's own job: a job that wasn't a job. A person arrested for a blog post, freed, but somehow still under house arrest. I asked Ran why he didn't quit his job.

"They don't let you! They say, 'Oh no, you can't quit,' and they keep paying your salary, no matter what letters you write or what you say. The secret police here in Sichuan want you to be part of the system. They won't let you leave."

"Because it's easier to control you?"

"It's not so direct. If something happens, then the *guobao* don't

need to deal with you. It's much more refined. Let's say you have a good boss, you like him. So they go to him. His daughter is going to college. So he asks you, really embarrassed, 'Do you really have to publish this or that thing? Do you always have to be so critical?' And so you feel, 'Don't I want his daughter to go to college?'"

"So you get \$250 a month for doing nothing?"

"It's a crazy society. Okay, let me give you an example. Wang Yi hasn't been in jail but I have. But Wang can't publish but I can. They have some sort of blacklist, but I'm not on it and he is. Why? I was in jail and he wasn't. You figure it out."

"Because he's a preacher? He has a congregation?"

"Right! You can't underestimate the role of house churches in Chinese society. They're the only real NGOs in China right now. People like Wang Yi have their own followers. These are real followers. It's not like on social media, which they can switch off when they want. I joked to Wang Yi that the government is more afraid of him than of people like me. They are real civil society."

We talked for another hour and left without encountering the feared *guobao*. My mind wandered back to Wang Yi's church and the sense that it might not last. In his open letter about Ran's detention, Wang had predicted his own imprisonment. Even though that had not happened, the letter contained a startling passage in which he talks to his wife, Jiang Rong, about his likely arrest:

My wife said, "I thought that you would be arrested before Ran Yunfei." Beginning on Wednesday, I fasted for three days and discussed with my wife various eventualities. In my prayers, I reached the certainty that I had been called.

No matter where I go, whether voluntary or involuntary, it will be for the sake of spreading the Gospel. My wife, no matter what, is a minister's wife. Human forces can easily alter the time, place and manner of our service but cannot change our basic mission of serving God.

So Jiang Rong asked me if I am arrested, what could she do? I answered, "Go to prison as if you were going to Africa. I am still a missionary, you are still a minister's wife. The Gospel was our life yesterday and it will be our life tomorrow. This is because the One who called us is the God of yesterday and the God of tomorrow."