

Article

Christianity and Social Reconstruction: Revisiting Y. T. Wu's Intellectual Legacy in Modern China

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Abstract

Y. T. Wu (Wu Yaozong, 1893–1979) was a prominent Christian figure in twentieth-century China. His most significant contribution was to the Three-self Patriotic Movement of Protestant Churches during the 1950s, which also rendered him a controversial figure among overseas Christians. Situating Wu within the broader context of modern China, this article contends that he belonged to the generation shaped by the May Fourth and New Culture Movements, and that his Christian thought was characterized by a strong sense of social responsibility from its inception. The Great Depression (1929–1933) and the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan in the 1930s prompted Wu to shift toward socialism, a position he articulated in relation to Christianity and social reconstruction. In the 1940s, Wu participated in the Chinese democratic movement, emphasizing Christianity's role in the development of the New China. Social reconstruction actually constitutes a significant dimension of Christianity in 20th-century China. While closely related to indigenization, it highlights social concerns and engagement. An examination of Wu's intellectual legacy prior to the 1950s clarifies this dominant theme within Christianity in Modern China. Revisiting Wu's intellectual legacy from this perspective may broaden contemporary discussions of indigenization and contextualization while also addressing critiques rooted in subsequent political events.

Keywords: Y. T. Wu (Wu Yaozong); Christianity; social reconstruction; May Fourth and New Culture Movements; modern China

1. Introduction

Y. T. Wu (Wu Yaozong, 吴耀宗, 1893–1979) was a pivotal figure of Christianity in twentieth-century China. As the leader of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) in the 1950s, he attracted both acclaim and criticism from domestic and international audiences. This complex reputation has, at times, complicated scholarly engagement with his intellectual legacy. A short biography and a memorial pamphlet have been published by the National Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Church in China (National-TSPM 1982; Shen 1989), which clearly praised Wu's contribution as a patriotic Christian leader. On the contrary, Hong Kong-based scholars Leung Ka-lun (梁家麟) and Ying Fuk-tsang (邢福增) gave Wu a more critical comment (Ying and Leung 1996). Leung highlighted the significance of Wu's "personal ideas" in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, including his theological and social thoughts (Leung 1996, p. 65). Ying continued to explore Wu's "theological reform" (shenxue gexin 神学革新) around the founding of the People's Republic of China, which focused on the reconciliation between Christianity and



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Communism (Ying 2014, 2016). The authors agree that Wu's personal theological thinking is highly important to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, but it is equally significant to put him in the context of "a great era" (Da shidai 大时代) of modern China, characterized by radical social and political changes (Ying 2011). It would be better to review the Three-Self Patriotic Movement from the dual perspectives of religious revival and political movement (Wickeri 1988, p. 114). There are also fresh views on Wu's thought from a broader perspective. For example, Chin Ken Pa (曾庆豹) reviewed Y. T. Wu's "Christian materialism" from a critical perspective on the modernity of China (Chin 2012). Peter Tze Ming Ng (吴梓明) reinterpreted Y. T. Wu's legacy from the perspective of glocalization, comparing Wu with his successor, Bishop K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxun 丁光训 1915–2012) (P. T. M. Ng 2012, pp. 201–20). Such research has, to some extent, relieved the political burden of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and will inspire us to explore Wu's thinking from a more historical and ecumenical perspective.

In this article, the authors hope to put Y.T. Wu in the broader background of modern China, from the May Fourth and New Culture Movements through the national crisis of the War of Resistance against Japan to nation-building in the 1940s, with "social reconstruction" (社会改造) as a prominent theme. It includes both social reform and social revolution.¹ While the former corresponds to the reform ideas of Christian organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the latter shares more with the Socialist-Communist political movement. Born during the May Fourth and New Culture Movements, it shifted to a more radical direction during the national crisis of the 1930s and finally merged into the nation-building process. As early as the 1970s, Ng Lee Ming (吴利明) examined Y. T. Wu's thoughts from the perspective of "Christianity and social change," placing him alongside figures such as T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen 赵紫宸, 1888–1979), Wu Leichuan (吴雷川, 1870–1944), and Xu Baoqian (徐宝谦, 1892–1944) (L. M. Ng 1981). A similar perspective can also be seen in a co-edited volume by Zhao Shilin (赵士林) and Duan Qi (段琦) (Zhao and Duan 2009). Ng identified two shifts in Wu's thoughts: from spiritual reform to social reform and from social reform to social revolution (L. M. Ng 1981, pp. 82–97). Thomas Reilly shared this perspective and went further to highlight the topic of national salvation and nation-building (Reilly 2012, 2021). Current works still emphasize the distinction between social reform and social revolution, while relatively downplaying their connection and continuity in historical processes. Following a similar approach of Ng and Reilly, this article will contribute to the field in two ways. Firstly, based on *The Collected Works of Y. T. Wu* (Wu Yaozong quanji 吴耀宗全集), the authors will have a comprehensive review of Wu's thought in chronological order. This will offer a clear pathway to the development of Wu's thinking against the historical background of modern China. Secondly, with social reconstruction as a dominant theme, the authors will reflect on two main paradigms in the study of Christianity in China. On the one hand, while acknowledging the theme of indigenization (Duan 2004; Yamamoto 2000), the authors hope to place greater emphasis on contextual engagement. On the other hand, unlike the cross-cultural approach of world Christianity (Bays 2012; Tao and Wickeri 2024; Walls 1996, 2002), this article will emphasize the connection between Christianity as a cultural factor and the broader background of modern China as a whole. In short, social reconstruction is not merely a partial issue in the indigenization of Christianity in China; rather, it is a shared theme in the histories of Christianity and modern China. As a key figure in the Chinese Christian Movement, Y. T. Wu's intellectual journey clearly elaborated on this topic, providing a typical case for redrawing the map of Christianity in modern China.

2. Christian Youth Against the Background of the New Culture Movement

Y. T. Wu's Christian life began against the backdrop of the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement (Chow 1960), with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) as a medium.² From the very beginning, his Christian faith has had a strong social concern (Z. Wu 2011, pp. 511–12). Wu was born into a non-Christian family in Guangdong Province. He attended a foreign-run school in his hometown and was later admitted to the Customs College (Shuiwu zhuanmen xuexiao 税务专门学校) in Beijing. Such an educational background gave him greater knowledge of both English and Western learning than most Chinese people.³ His close relationship with Christianity was due to his two alumni from the Customs College, Xu Baoqian and Zhang Qinshi (张钦士, 1890–1932), both of whom worked for the YMCA after graduation.⁴

Just as with the intellectuals during the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement, Wu's Christian faith began with seeking ways not only for spiritual needs but also for saving the nation. According to Wu's own account, ever since he embraced Christianity, his thoughts and professional outlook have undergone "a profound revolution"; admitting the boundless expanse of the future, a luminous path ahead has been discovered" (Y. Wu [1923] 2015c, vol. 1, p. 92). After graduation from school, having experienced society's moral turbidity and the depravity of the human heart, he arrived at a philosophy of life that he termed "doing one's duty and leaving the rest to fate." He held that "there is an inescapable responsibility incumbent upon me." As to what the outcome might be, he could only "let fate take its course" (Y. Wu [1923] 2015c, vol. 1, p. 93). In 1911, after his first encounter with Christianity at a summer camp, he remarked that Christianity could offer comfort and encouragement and that it was instituted to meet spiritual needs. In 1917, he moved to Beijing and stayed in the YMCA dormitory, "coming into very close contact with Christianity" (Y. Wu [1923] 2015c, vol. 1, p. 94). A few months later, his perception of Christianity changed significantly. Especially after reading The Sermon on the Mount, he felt a profound, unquestioning conviction in Jesus, sensing that he had finally found the truth that he had long sought yet never found. In 1918, at a YMCA gospel meeting led by George Sherwood Eddy (1871–1963), Y. T. Wu made his commitment to become a Christian.⁵ In 1920, Y. T. Wu resigned from his position at the customs office to work for the YMCA. The root of his faith rested solely in Jesus. His conversion to Jesus was not because He was "God," but because He was "human." Jesus is the "incarnation of truth": He is the hope in times of difficulty and the strength in the midst of struggle; Jesus leads people to believe that life has meaning and that an ideal world is attainable (Y. Wu [1923] 2015c, vol. 1, p. 95). Through the YMCA network, we can see that Wu's Christian faith had a strong human orientation, with social engagement as an important approach.

Corresponding to the student and youth culture during the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movements (Yeh 1990), Wu took the lead in the Christian Student Movement. In 1922, Wu was appointed Executive Secretary of the School Department of the YMCA. That same year, the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) held its assembly in Beijing. This prompted Wu to begin reflecting on the issues facing the Chinese Christian student movement. In his view, the WSCF was "the most powerful element in terms of modern ideas and goals" (Y. Wu [1922] 2015, vol. 1, p. 52). The primary reason for its success, he argued, was that it was "a movement of young people, a movement within the student community" (Y. Wu [1922] 2015, vol. 1, p. 53). It was committed to addressing social issues, national issues, religious issues, international and racial issues, and so forth. If the WSCF bore responsibility for "world reconstruction," then Chinese Christian students must bear responsibility for "China's reconstruction" (Y. Wu [1922] 2015, vol. 1, p. 54). Here, we can see that the conception of "reconstruction" came firstly from the Christian

world. At the same time, Wu also got clues from the youth movement under Communist influence. He went further to argue that the greatest contribution of the New Culture Movement to Chinese life lay in the concept of “awakening” (Juexing 觉醒) (Y. Wu [1922] 2015, vol. 1, p. 54). He pointed out, “China as a nation is now in the process of taking shape, and Chinese students are the focal point of the awakened” (Y. Wu [1922] 2015, vol. 1, p. 59). Chinese students were like a thermometer, indicating the nation’s vital trends. “Within the Christian movement in China, the student community is a unique sphere with its own distinct interests and needs; therefore, it requires special approaches” (Y. Wu [1922] 2015, vol. 1, p. 60). To push forward the Chinese Christian student movement, he suggested, firstly, fostering a strong, nationwide sense of awakening among Chinese Christian students; secondly, Christian students developing a practical and feasible plan for the nation and society; and thirdly, making a Christian contribution to the burgeoning New Culture Movement (Y. Wu [1922] 2015, vol. 1, p. 64).

Wu compared the Christian student movement with the broader student movement in China. It was precisely the non-Christian students who took the lead in launching the New Culture Movement and the patriotic movement, while Christian students lagged far behind. The Christian movement in China had not yet become truly Chinese, and the Christian student movement had failed to breathe new life into old China (Y. Wu [1923] 2015b, vol. 1, p. 129). For this reason, a “truly Chinese church” was needed, and it must preach the “social gospel” (Y. Wu [1923] 2015b, vol. 1, p. 131). The differences between the non-Christian student movement and the Christian student movement in their propositions could be summarized roughly as follows: one proceeded from a political perspective, while the other proceeded from a social perspective; one was based on the nation, while the other was based on the individual; one sought to reform from the top down, while the other sought to reform from the bottom up; one was radical, while the other was peaceful (Y. Wu [1923] 2015a, vol. 1, p. 184). What YMCA then needed was “nothing more than a spiritual revolution” (Y. Wu [1924] 2015, vol. 1, p. 203). In the past, the YMCA had, at most, fulfilled the dual functions of a “charitable organization” and a “club.” Since the name of the YMCA contained the keyword “Christian”, its mission necessarily embodied the spirit of Christianity. The YMCA should reach outward and collaborate with other organizations and groups. “To ensure that the spirit of YMCA permeates society as a whole—this was the external mission of the YMCA” (Y. Wu [1924] 2015, vol. 1, p. 205).

However, it was precisely because of the WSCF Assembly held in Beijing that the Anti-Christian Movement was sparked.⁶ Compared to most Christians, Wu approached this issue from a more positive perspective. He maintained that “the worthiest aspect of the anti-Christian movement to study is its positive contributions and the reflections it elicited within the religious community.” “The anti-Christian movement,” he argued, “indeed promoted the work of religious self-renewal within the country; its contribution was truly significant” (Y. Wu [1927] 2015a, vol. 1, p. 248). From a factual perspective, there was indeed a connection between Christianity and imperialism. “Western nations did not engage in aggression because they believed in Christianity, but because Western peoples inherently possessed an aggressive spirit; consequently, the religion they practiced also bore the mark of aggression” (Y. Wu [1927] 2015a, vol. 1, p. 249). Regarding the propagation of Christianity in China, the greatest criticism was that “they did not have an adequate understanding of and respect for Chinese culture, transplanting Western religious concepts and organizational structures—root and branch—into China; thus, the majority of believers were from the lower and middle classes, while the intelligentsia was extremely scarce” (Y. Wu [1927] 2015a, vol. 1, p. 249). In terms of Christian theology, “most churches remained fiercely conservative” (Y. Wu [1927] 2015a, vol. 1, p. 250), clinging to doctrines such as Trinity and Virgin Mary. Even though the United States had experienced the de-

bate between Modernists and Fundamentalists, it amounted to “same wine, different bottle.” Furthermore, there is the exclusivist attitude of Christianity, which “is particularly evident to Easterners” (Y. Wu [1927] 2015a, vol. 1, p. 251). On the issue of religion and science, he cited Bertrand Russell and John Dewey, hoping to advocate a scientific view of religion.

From 1924 to 1927, Wu got the chance to study in the United States. He first enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and later took elective courses at Columbia University. In 1927, he obtained a master’s degree from Columbia University. During this period, significant changes were taking place in China’s political and intellectual landscape, and Wu quickly shifted his focus from the May Fourth and New Culture Movements to the themes of China’s revolution and national reconstruction. He noted, “China was already in the process of national transformation; its problems seemed to have passed the critical juncture of survival or extinction, and had entered a phase concerning the process and timeline of reconstruction” (Y. Wu [1927] 2015b, vol. 1, p. 262). Christianity, he argued, had made immense contributions across historical contexts, and it held an even more special position in that present situation. “The mission Jesus realized is also our mission.” “The rise and fall of Christianity, as well as the future of China’s reconstruction work, all depend on our efforts” (Y. Wu [1927] 2015b, vol. 1, p. 264). China’s revolution has encompassed national, political, social, and ideological dimensions, exerting a broad and profound influence on society. Chinese Christianity also requires a revolution—namely, a “Christian revolution” (Y. Wu [1927] 2015c, vol. 1, p. 322). The first aspect was the revolution of faith, including a reexamination of Christian dogma. The second aspect was the revolution in daily life, which required integrating religion into everyday existence. “Go to the people” (Dao minjian qu 到民间去) was also the rallying cry of Christian youth.

He believed that during China’s national reconstruction, two prevailing ideologies emerged: militarism and materialism. Historically, both held great potential but also posed significant risks. “The most distinctive aspect of Jesus’ teachings is his ‘principle of reconciliation’ (Wei’ai zhuyi 唯爱主义)” (Y. Wu [1929] 2015, vol. 1, p. 342).⁷ The “principle of reconciliation,” he argued, is not passive non-resistance, but active love. “World peace, I am afraid, cannot be achieved through political means” (Y. Wu [1929] 2015, vol. 1, p. 342). The practice of the “principle of reconciliation”, he maintained, was most essential in personal life --- that was, transforming competition into mutual assistance, revenge into compassion, and hypocrisy into honesty. “The most critical issue in China’s reconstruction is people’s livelihood; and within that, the most critical issue is the rural problem” (Y. Wu [1929] 2015, vol. 1, p. 346). Since the New Culture Movement, Christianity in China had undergone the Anti-Christian Movement and the National Revolutionary Movement. Against this backdrop, Christianity had no choice but to seek its own way of survival. This might well be “the first revolution of Christianity in the East,” and it might even “usher in a new era for Christianity worldwide” (Y. Wu [1929] 2015, vol. 1, p. 348).

It was during this period that Y. T. Wu began to raise the issue of Christianity and social reconstruction. The seed was planted during the May Fourth and New Culture Movements. In his later years, he reflected that “the May Fourth Movement and the anti-Christian movements had a profound impact on us young Christians” (Y. Wu [1966] 2020, vol. 4, pt. 2, p. 230). Wu was not only influenced by the intellectual discussions on religion during this period (Sun 2000), but also invested himself in the student movements alongside his non-Christian counterparts. While facing the Anti-Christian Movement, he expressed more criticism and reflection on Christianity. He pointed out that China at the time was effectively in a state of disarray, rife with war and turmoil. “The fundamental—and most urgent—issue is how to fundamentally reform the structure of society” (Y. Wu [1930] 2015, vol. 1, p. 412). The primary reason Christianity at that time was unable to

make a positive contribution to society was that “it has failed to find a living religion within the context of real life” (Y. Wu [1930] 2015, vol. 1, p. 414). The church emphasized spiritual disciplines, prayer, and worship—focusing on what it called the spiritual life—while neglecting real-life and social realities. Although Wu also criticized the foreign aspect of Christianity in China, he did not join the mainstream of the indigenization movement at the time. Social reconstruction was his main label. It was connected to the indigenization movement, but shared more with the non-Christian student movement. This also explained Wu’s shift from the New Culture Movement to the revolutionary discourse.

3. Christianity and Social Reconstruction During National Crisis

According to Wu’s own statement, the Mukden Incident in September 1931 was a milestone in his intellectual shift (Y. Wu [1966] 2020, vol. 4, pt. 2, p. 236). Following the Japanese attack on Northeast China, Wu pointed out that “the current situation in our country is not only grave but also extremely complex” (Y. Wu [1931] 2015b, vol. 1, p. 483). He held that Japanese imperialism was built on the foundations of nationalism and capitalism. He argued that the League of Nations and other international sanctions were not the way to resolve the fundamental issues. From China’s domestic perspective, he maintained that unless fundamental reforms were undertaken in the country’s political and social systems, no measures would ultimately prove effective. There were roughly three methods of resisting Japan: declaring war, non-armed resistance, and world revolution. He endorsed non-armed resistance, that is, the “principle of reconciliation” (Y. Wu [1931] 2015b, vol. 1, p. 485). This was because one of “the fundamental spirits of Christianity is unconditional love, which, taken to its utmost, extends even to one’s enemies” (Y. Wu [1931] 2015b, vol. 1, p. 486). Y. T. Wu advocated a non-cooperation movement against Japan, particularly the boycott of Japanese goods. He pointed out that “non-cooperation is the only effective weapon to resist Japan” (Y. Wu [1931] 2015a, vol. 1, p. 491). As long as the entire nation stood united, the Japanese would not only suffer economic stagnation but also face hardships in daily life in China, making military deployment difficult. Japan’s aggression against China, he stated, was not “a matter of a single day or night,” but aimed at “the annihilation of the entire nation.” The non-cooperation movement, he maintained, was a protracted one that would not cease “until the Sino-Japanese issue is completely resolved” (Y. Wu [1931] 2015a, vol. 1, p. 493). The outbreak of Japanese aggression significantly stimulated a shift in Wu’s thinking. Compared to the 1920s, there emerged a tendency in which “national salvation outweighed enlightenment.”⁸

After the Japanese attack on Shanghai in 1932, hostilities intensified. The Japanese military reinforced its troops by tens of thousands in preparation for a full-scale offensive. The Chinese side, too, was fully prepared to resist to the end. Y. T. Wu criticized, “The disaster in Northeast China stemmed from the authorities’ policy of non-resistance” (Y. Wu [1932] 2017a, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 85). But what were Christians to do? Here, the contradiction between the principle of reconciliation and the use of force was laid bare.

The fundamental spirit of Christ is reconciliation, yet the principle of reconciliation and the use of force are utterly incompatible; even if one were to force a strained interpretation, one’s conscience could not find peace in it. In the midst of this national crisis, we cannot advocate non-resistance and surrender our land without a fight; yet, in accordance with the spirit of Jesus, we ultimately feel that the use of force is inappropriate. Thus, caught in this central contradiction, we are unable to hold a firm and steadfast faith. Those who advocate reconciliation alone may be regarded as naive and fail to gain others’ understanding; those who advocate force, too, view it merely as a necessary transitional measure. Can we remain at ease with contradiction without seeking a solution? The way of Christ

is grounded in reality yet transcends it; the principle of reconciliation He teaches is both daring and creative. The horrors of war convince us that the use of force is something no civilized people can condone; yet Christ's teachings also reveal a glimmer of hope for the future. Therefore, in this harsh and unforgiving world, it is an urgent necessity that we realize the principle of reconciliation through a spirit of daring and creativity (Y. Wu [1932] 2017a, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 86).

Although this statement was jointly issued by YMCA and the Young Women's Christian Associations (YWCA), Y. T. Wu's personal character was fully revealed in this passage alone. Instead of taking an either-or stance, Wu proposed a way of Christ that is "grounded in reality yet transcends it," advocating reconciliation through a spirit of daring and creativity. This means that, while acknowledging the harsh reality of war, he insisted on a mode of action rooted in the principle of reconciliation—neither passive non-resistance nor mere armed confrontation, but a creative middle path. This reveals Wu's genuine struggle between national crisis and Christian faith and also foreshadows the inner logic of his later turn toward socialist thought: he was always seeking a way to integrate social reconstruction (including necessary forms of struggle) with the spirit of Christianity. Here, the contradiction in his mind between national salvation and the principle of reconciliation was clearly evident. However, the most striking shift in his thinking during this period was his engagement in discussions of Christianity and social reconstruction.

The Great Depression of 1929–1933 had a profound impact on Y. T. Wu's thinking (Z. Wu 2011, p. 522). In 1933, in an article about the Christian Student Movement, he analyzed four major contradictions in the international situation: imperialism's oppression of weak nations; conflict among imperialist powers; the contradiction between imperialist and socialist states; and the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He pointed out that "the transition from capitalism to socialism is inevitable" and that "the proletariat suffers the most, and their demand for revolution is the greatest" (Y. Wu [1933] 2017b, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 85–86). In another article, "Christianity and Social Reconstruction" (Jidujiao yu shehui gaizao 基督教与社会改造), Y.T. Wu distinguished between the concepts of "reform" (Gailiang 改良) and "reconstruction" (Gaizao 改造). "Reform," he maintained, could only alleviate symptoms, not address root causes. What he meant by "social reconstruction" was: (1) getting to the bottom of matters, investigating the causal relationships between phenomena, and identifying their root causes; and (2) once these causal relationships were understood, seeking fundamental solutions through effective means (Y. Wu [1933] 2017a, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 95). What Christianity has undertaken over the past two thousand years has amounted to nothing more than reform. The greatest flaw committed by Christians is "subjectivism and idealism." Future work should, in addition to saving souls, involve more social investigation and in-depth study of the social sciences. In an article regarding China's Challenge to Christianity, Wu pointed out that for China to transform from a traditional civilization into a modern nation, it must accomplish three tasks: overcoming internal strife, resisting external aggression, and choosing between individualism and socialism in the process of social reconstruction. Against this backdrop, Christianity needed to advocate for the "Social Gospel" and fulfill its social responsibilities (Y. Wu [1934] 2017, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 117–19).

In 1934, Y. T. Wu officially published his book, *The Social Gospel*. In the "Preface," he explicitly stated: "The background of this book is a China teetering on the brink of survival or extinction, and a world rife with contradictions and turmoil. The central theme of this book is that today's social system must be reconstructed, and that Christianity has a unique contribution to make to this social reconstruction" (Y. Wu 2017b, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 120). In the first chapter of the book, he further articulated his position from the outset: "We believe that religion is living" (Y. Wu 2017a, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 123). To this end, we must reveal the

essence of religion, eradicate its hypocritical manifestations, and infuse every aspect of life with a religion full of vitality to build the ideal society of the future. He believed that early Christianity was originally a “religion imbued with a revolutionary spirit.” However, over the course of two thousand years, Christianity “placed too much emphasis on individual salvation and neglected social improvement,” thereby becoming a collaborator of the ruling class and the exploitative system (Y. Wu 2017a, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 124). In terms of social reconstruction today, he observed, communism was the greatest force. “We sympathized with the goals of communism, yet we couldn’t endorse the means advocated by communism” (Y. Wu 2017a, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 136). As Christians, he maintained, what they needed was the “Social Gospel.” The “Social Gospel” signifies “emancipation” (Jiefang 解放), encompassing material emancipation, spiritual emancipation, and intellectual emancipation (Y. Wu 2017a, vol. 2, pt. 2, pp. 137–38). Furthermore, Wu argued that what they pursued was “not piecemeal reform, but thoroughgoing reconstruction.” At the same time, he argued, the standpoint from which they were to reconstruct society was “the Christian standpoint,” or the “Jesus-centered standpoint” (Y. Wu 2017a, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 138). Wu stated that Jesus opposed violent revolution and emphasized inner freedom; that he rejected narrow conceptions of nation and proclaimed the universal brotherhood of humanity; and that while not disregarding material existence, he placed even greater emphasis on the spiritual destiny of human society. This was the distinctive quality of Jesus’ thought. In terms of intellectual continuity, Wu’s “Social Gospel” carried forward YMCA’s reformist ideas in the 1920s (W. Li 2014). However, in terms of intellectual rupture, his views at the time prefigured certain emphases of what would later be known as Liberation Theology.⁹ The influence of social sciences, particularly Marxism, was very evident. In this respect, Wu seemed to be parting ways with his fellow Christians.

According to his own narrative, Wu elaborated on the influence of the new social sciences on his own thinking. In particular, he mentioned *The Communist Manifesto*, which strengthened his “awareness of social reconstruction” (Y. Wu [1932] 2017b, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 215). In a review of contemporary publications in 1935, he specifically cited the magazine *Red Flag* (Hongqi 红旗) and the works of Qu Qiubai (瞿秋白), as well as the writings of left-wing authors such as Lu Xun (鲁迅), Guo Moruo (郭沫若), Mao Dun (茅盾), Ba Jin (巴金), Ding Ling (丁玲), and Tian Han (田汉), along with books like *An Analysis of the History of Chinese Society* (Zhongguo shehui zhi shi de fenxi 中国社会之史的分析) and *Chinese Society and the Chinese Revolution* (Zhongguo shehui yu Zhongguo geming 中国社会与中国革命). His overall impression was that “the leftist writers are occupying a dominant position,” while “Christian literature publishing lagged far behind” (Y. Wu [1935] 2017b, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 228). He analyzed the domestic and international situations of this period, specifically pointing out the influence of feudal forces and imperialism (Y. Wu [1935] 2017a, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 251–54). In an article assessing the international situation, he examined in particular the Communist Party’s historical philosophy, economic theories, and methods of social reconstruction (Y. Wu [1935] 2017d, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 255–58). In discussions about the future of youth, he specifically emphasized the need to study Christianity and communism and to compare Karl Marx with Jesus (Y. Wu [1935] 2017c, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 259–61).

In an analysis of the world situation in 1936, Wu pointed out that “the world is on the eve of war, heading toward a new cycle of revolution and war” (Y. Wu [1936] 2017, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 381). He maintained that the primary cause leading to World War II lay in “the fundamental contradictions of capitalism” (Y. Wu [1936] 2017, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 382). He criticized the collusion between German and Japanese fascism, while affirming the Soviet Union and the liberation movements in colonial and semi-colonial countries. Against this backdrop, Wu affirmed the positive significance of China’s War of Resistance. This included: (1) the liberation of the Chinese nation itself; (2) the advancement of other weak

and small nations; and (3) the advancement of the social reconstruction movement worldwide (Y. Wu [1939] 2017, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 537). He also explicitly stated that “the world of the future will inevitably be a socialist world” (Y. Wu [1939] 2017, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 542). He emphasized the social nature of Christianity. While Christianity does not offer a concrete plan for social reconstruction or world peace, it can contribute “certain principles, a spirit, and an attitude” (Y. Wu [1939] 2017, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 547).

In 1938, after a brief visit to the United States, Y. T. Wu returned to China and was appointed director of the YMCA’s Publications Department. That year, he met with senior leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, including Zhou Enlai (周恩来), Wu Yuzhang (吴玉章), and Xu Teli (徐特立). While attending a conference of the International Missionary Council (IMC) held in India, he also met with Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, and others. Whether at home or abroad, Wu’s horizons had broadened significantly, extending far beyond the confines of Christianity itself. At the height of the War of Resistance Against Japan, Wu published his book *Religious Faith in a Great Era* (*Dashidai de zongjiao xinyang* 大时代的宗教信仰). He believed that the period from the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 7 to the August 13th Resistance Battle of Shanghai constituted “China’s Great Era”—a time that was “the critical juncture of life and death for the Chinese nation” (Y. Wu [1938] 2017, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 339). From a Christian standpoint, he maintained that China’s War of Resistance would ultimately achieve victory. He pointed out that China’s struggle was a fight for freedom and equality. However, he opposed narrow-minded patriotism, upholding Christianity’s trans-ethnic and trans-national stance, and argued that the ultimate goal was to establish a world of universal harmony. He further noted that the Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Communist Party, as the two principal forces, must unite and cooperate. In this Great Era, he argued, the Christian church must above all grasp “the great spirit of sacrifice of Jesus” (Y. Wu [1938] 2017, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 361). He emphasized the spirit of the Cross, asserting that only the life of the Cross could lead people through difficult and trying times and bring about the victory of the national revolution.

The War of Resistance against Japan was like a “fire baptism” to Chinese Christians (Brook 1996; Lee and Lau 2011). During the national crisis, they also cultivated a strong national consciousness, just as their non-Christian fellows. Wu’s ideas on Christianity and social reconstruction were formed mainly in that context. Different from most Chinese, including his Christian fellows, Wu had a broader mind due to his study experience abroad and his tenure at the publishing department of YMCA. His shift to socialism was not just due to the national crisis but also aligned with the latest trends in the social sciences worldwide. While his spiritual mentor, George Sherwood Eddy, also turned to socialism in the 1930s, Wu’s change should not seem so strange in light of the national crisis in China then. And as a social activist, Wu was also lucky to meet the proper Communist leaders, with Zhou Enlai in particular. Such personal contacts offered him a real chance to apply his Christian ideas.

4. Christian Renewal in the Context of Nation-Building

Between December 1941 and August 1945, Wu resided in Chengdu of Sichuan Province, where he dedicated increased time to translation and writing. He also played an active role in the democratic movement, with his residence becoming known as the “House of Democracy” (Minzhu zhi jia 民主之家). In June 1946, Wu, along with Ma Xulun (马叙伦), Lei Jieqiong (雷洁琼), and others, traveled to Nanjing to petition the KMT Government and prepared an English memorandum for General George C. Marshall. The group subsequently became victims of the notorious Xiangyan Massacre. As the War of

Resistance against Japan concluded, Wu began to consider the future construction of New China and the prospective role of Christianity in this process.

In his 1942 article “Christianity and the New China” (*Jidujiao yu xin Zhongguo* 基督教与新中国), Wu pointed out that what was needed was “a new China of freedom and equality,” and that he hoped for the “realization of democratic politics” (Y. Wu [1942] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 1, pp. 4–5). What contribution could Christianity make to the construction of the New China? He noted: First, Christianity can strengthen the faith of the common people in the inevitable victory of the Chinese people and of justice and truth; second, Christianity could inspire the spirit of self-sacrifice and service among the people; third, Christianity could contribute many capable individuals to the construction of New China; and fourth, Christianity could serve as a driving force for the realization of democratic politics (Y. Wu [1942] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 1, pp. 6–7). In his 1943 article “Christianity and the New Society” (*Jidujiao yu xin shehui* 基督教与新社会), he noted that the construction of the “New World” and the construction of the “New Society” were interconnected (Y. Wu [1943] 2018a, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 12). He traced the root cause of war to the capitalist system and the imperialism that derived from it. In his view, Sun Yat-sen’s Principle of People’s Welfare was a response formulated in light of China’s national conditions and the world situation. Y. T. Wu maintained that “the most fundamental doctrine of Christianity is love.” The most important meaning of love lies in respecting the dignity of every individual and enabling their full development. This, he argued, was “the social mission of Christianity” (Y. Wu [1943] 2018a, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 16). In his article “New Priorities for the Postwar Development of the Chinese Christian Church” (*Zhanhou Zhongguo jidujiaohui jianshe de xin zhongdian* 战后中国基督教会建设的新重点), he emphasized church unity and the cultivation of Chinese leadership talent. Interestingly, he placed particular emphasis on the development of remote regions in the southwest and northwest, arguing that people of lower social status—such as peasants and working class—should be the primary focus of the church’s work. Ultimately, he maintained that the church should adhere to its “prophetic mission” and criticize unreasonable phenomena in both Chinese society and internationally (Y. Wu [1943] 2018b, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 62).

In his commemorative speech marking the 100th anniversary of YMCA, Wu stated: “We believe that a new China and a new world will surely emerge in the foreseeable future, and the YMCA’s contribution in the years ahead is to bring about the birth of this new life” (Y. Wu [1944] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 62). After Japan’s surrender, Y. T. Wu analyzed the postwar world situation. He criticized the United States for opposing fascism on the one hand and harboring deep-seated prejudice against the Soviet Union and communism on the other. At the same time, he defended the Soviet Union, arguing that it was not advocating a world revolution but rather hoped to focus on domestic construction; it sought peace, not war. He pointed out that “China is a vital link in the international community” and that “China’s problems can be seen as a microcosm of the world’s problems” (Y. Wu [1945] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 1, pp. 129–30). In this dark period preceding the dawn, only the power of the people could prevent the outbreak of a Third World War. Y. T. Wu pointed out that China’s democratic movement was the aspiration of the entire nation and also the trend of the times. This encompassed two aspects: political democracy and economic democracy. He analyzed the several choices facing China at the time: the path of Anglo-American capitalism was impassable, and the path of Soviet socialism was also difficult to implement for the time being. China should follow the “path of New Democracy”—neither capitalism nor socialism, but a transitional society (Y. Wu [1946] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 153). He also analyzed the three major forces within Chinese society at the time: the Kuomintang had lost the people’s support; the Communist Party should develop into a truly legitimate political party; and a third force would help advance the realization of democracy.

From 1946 to 1949, Wu authored a series of commentaries that were subsequently compiled into the anthology *Light and Darkness* (*Hei'an yu Guangming* 黑暗与光明). These works reflect his analysis of China during a period of significant social transition. Wu observed, "Our world is undergoing a great transformation, the essence of which is the reckoning with all fascist forces, the establishment of political democracy, the advancement of economic democracy, the liberation of oppressed nations, and the decline of imperialism" (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 114). He asserted that, although the world remained in a period of darkness, signs of progress were emerging. "The old order, like a dilapidated house, is crumbling and collapsing in the face of storms; the new order, like the rising sun, has already pierced through the clouds and mist of darkness to reveal a clear sky" (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 131).

In 1948, Y. T. Wu published an article titled "The Present-Day Tragedy of Christianity" (*Jidujiao de shidai beiju* 基督教的时代悲剧) in *Tianfeng* (*Heavenly Wind Christian weekly* 天风周刊), provoking considerable controversy in Christian circles both in China and abroad. In it, he pointed out that "the protagonist of the present-day tragedy of Christianity is the United States" (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 277). The tradition of Christianity in China, he argued, was mainly that of Anglo-American Christianity; consequently, in many respects, it had almost become a "replica of American-style Christianity" (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 279). "If our ideological line is identical to that of contemporary Western Christianity, we will indeed unwittingly become tools of imperialism and cultural aggression." If what we propagate is merely individualism and revivalist religion, then "Christianity could only be the opium of the people" (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 279). He further argued that the historical tragedy of Christianity lay in the following: "Over the past century, it has unwittingly become a conservative force. In the present-day world, it has even become a reactionary force" (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 280). Western countries not only proclaimed this reactionary plan as gospel to the world, but also used financial and military power to align it with reactionary forces.

Wu reviewed the major trends in Christianity over the preceding thirty years, including modernism and fundamentalism, liberalism and humanism, the principle of reconciliation, dialectical theology and neo-orthodoxy, and revivalism. He also reflected on the anti-Christian movement and the renewal of Christianity in China. Overall, he maintained that "Christianity in contemporary society has failed to fulfill its responsibilities to create and to lead." "China is in a great era, and Christianity in this great era is inevitably subjected to the same cleansing and tempering" (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 308). Building on this, Wu explored the theme of "Christian reconstruction." He argued that "Christianity's evolution from the Roman Catholic Church of the feudal era to Protestantism in the capitalist era marked one stage; the present today is gradually progressing from capitalism toward socialism, and therefore, Christianity will inevitably enter a new stage at this juncture" (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 321). He outlined the direction and path of reform: First, Christianity must break free from the systems of capitalism and imperialism; second, the Chinese church must implement the principles of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation to become a genuinely Chinese church; and third, Christianity must understand its own history and the current era. He emphasized, "The present era is one of people's liberation, an era of the collapse of the old order, and it should also be an era for Christianity to cast off the old and usher in the new" (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 322). Christianity, he maintained, must undergo a thorough awakening and throw itself into the torrent of the era. In his article "Christianity under the People's Democratic Dictatorship" (*Renmin minzhu zhuanzheng xia de jidujiao* 人民民主专政下的基督教), Wu further noted, "If the direction of Christianity is consistent with that of New Democracy, it should also be a component of this united front" (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, pp. 345–46). He added,

“China’s future is bright: if Chinese Christianity can adopt a proactive and forward-looking attitude in this new era, the future of Chinese Christianity should also be bright” (Y. Wu [1949] 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 354).

From 1943 to 1950, Y. T. Wu’s *No One Has Seen God* (*Meiyou ren kanjian shangdi* 没有人看见上帝) went through six editions in succession. This work was regarded as the highest embodiment of his theological thought. One of his fundamental theses was that God was “the universal truth that pervades the universe and governs human life, unified, personified, and imbued with emotion” (Y. Wu 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 23). He proposed that we should establish a “scientific, realistic conception of God” (Y. Wu 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 27). An important thesis of this book was that “faith in God is not in conflict with materialism.” “A person who believes in God can at the same time believe in materialism” (Y. Wu 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 42). Wu maintained that a central thesis of the book is that “God is Truth” (Y. Wu 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 95). However, he argued that knowing the truth was not merely a matter of reason but also involved emotion and intuition. He distinguished between the methods of scientists and religious believers, noting that the former emphasized reason, while the latter focused on emotion and intuition. Perhaps because religion placed too much emphasis on the emotional aspect, people had downplayed its rational dimension. In terms of intuitive understanding in religion, one of the most important means was prayer. Y. T. Wu pointed out that “prayer is the whole of human life’s recognition, communion, pursuit, and submission to the whole truth of the universe” (Y. Wu 2018, vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 78). In prayer, he argued, we were liberated from the prison of the self, discovered the truth, goodness, and beauty of the universe, and became one with it. Through prayer, he maintained, tempered by truth, we could forge a new personality and even attain the spiritual state of Jesus.

Through this work, Wu fixed two issues. On one hand, he reached the cognitive conclusion that Christianity and communism could be reconciled by promoting a scientific conception of God. On the other hand, he maintained his identity as a Christian by emphasizing the emotional aspect of faith, particularly through prayer. As a social activist, Wu had come close to the Communists. Now he was also intellectually prepared.

In the 1940s, Y. T. Wu clearly outlined a roadmap for the realization of Christianity and social reconstruction in New China. It was born in the context of the May Fourth and New Culture Movements, and blossomed amid the national crisis of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. While disappointed with the Nationalist Party (KMT) government, he gradually reconciled with the Communists, both in practice and in theory. As a social activist, Wu still dreamed of a “third way,” different from both the Nationalists and the Communists, although he was shifting to the latter. He had two missions: church revival and nation-building, which coincided in their shared theme of Christianity and social reconstruction.

5. Conclusions

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement provided an opportunity for Wu to realize his double missions of Christian revival and social reconstruction. Later, Wu articulated his perspective on the “renewal” of Christianity in three dimensions: the “Sinicization” of Christianity to eliminate foreign religious connotations; the “socialization” of the church to promote social reform; and the “modernization” of Christianity to ensure its interpretations correspond with contemporary trends (Y. Wu [1966] 2020, vol. 4, pt. 2, pp. 230–31). Specifically, the “modernization” dimension reflects his training in the liberal school, including his YMCA work experience and his studies at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University. The “socialization” dimension embodies the influence of social sciences, including Marxism, which bridges Christianity and social reconstruction. The “Sinicization”

dimension continues the indigenization theme, but breaks with the former in a new socio-political background. Wu shared the “modernization” dimension with the Christian intellectuals on the liberal side, such as T.C. Chao and Xu Baoqian. He surpassed them in the “socialization” dimension through a shift from social reform to social revolution. His final aim was realized in the “Sinicization” dimension through the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. A New China under Communist rule had become a fact, which had become the precondition for leading an independent Christian movement. Instead of emphasizing the difference between social reform and social revolution, this article focuses more on the historical connection and process. Such an intellectual journey led to Wu’s pioneering leadership role during the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. At the same time, Wu’s intellectual legacy contributed to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement rather than determining it. We still need to situate Wu within the broader context of modern China.

Daniel Bays has proposed a “Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment” in China during the first two decades of the twentieth century, which represented a “Golden Age” of foreign missions (Bays 2012, pp. 92–120). In the meantime, the Chinese Christians were always seeking an independent Christianity with Chinese characters. Lian Xi mentioned a convergence of Chinese nationalism and Christian revival, which was described as “popular Christianity” (Lian 2010, pp. 12–15). Y. T. Wu was first a son of the “Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment”. He was educated in foreign schools, and his understanding of Christianity was largely influenced by missionaries such as George Sherwood Eddy. His work at the YMCA is a kind of joint enterprise between foreign missions and Chinese Christians. Wu broke away from the mission enterprise through an awakening of Chinese consciousness and developed along with social movements and national crises in modern China. Unlike his fellow members of popular Christianity, Wu did not immerse himself solely in spiritual affairs. Rather, he had a strong social concern and invested largely in social sciences and social activities. Interestingly, Wu’s intellectual journey corresponded to his counterparts in other religions. For example, Master Tai Xu (太虚, 1890–1947) initiated Humanist Buddhism (renjian fojiao 人间佛教), which was later developed by Zhao Puchu (赵朴初, 1907–2000) (Sheng 2025; Welch 1968). In Islam, there was a “Muslim Cultural Movement” (Huijiao wenhua yundong 回教文化运动), which raised leading scholars such as Ma Jian (马坚, 1906–1978) (Zhenzhong Li 2016; Lipman 1997). Thus, we can find a common theme between religious faith and social reconstruction in modern China (Goossaert and Palmer 2011).

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Notes

- ¹ Reform and revolution are two prominent themes of modern China. Ma Yong argues that the May Fourth Movement is a landmark in going beyond the dilemma of reform and revolution. For details, see (Ma 2001). Chen Xulu highlights the structural change along reform and revolution with a metaphor of metabolism. For more information, see (Chen 1992). Peter Zarrow's book about China in war and revolution provides a general background for such a discussion. For further discussion, see (Zarrow 2005).
- ² Yihua Xu has explored the connections among the YMCA, liberal theology, and the later Three-self Patriotic Movement. For details, see (Xu 2004).
- ³ Regarding the biography of Y. T. Wu, see (Shen 1989; Z. Wu 2011).
- ⁴ Y. T. Wu, Xu Baoqian, and Zhang Qinshi were known as the "Big Three" of the Customs College. Notably, they all converted to Christianity and worked together at the YMCA. For more on the development of the YMCA in China, see (Xing 1996; Zhao 2008).
- ⁵ Eddy was a key leader in the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions and the YMCA. He visited China four times—in 1911, 1913, 1914, and 1918—attracting many Chinese youths to the faith. In the 1930s, he ended his tenure at the YMCA and began associating with Karl Paul and Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Socialist group. For details, see (Stanley 2000).
- ⁶ About the anti-Christian movement, see (Lutz 1988; Yang 1994).
- ⁷ Y. T. Wu joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FoR) in 1921 and later served as chairman of its Chinese branch. In 1931, he became the editor of the Chinese edition of the journal *The Quarterly of Reconciliation*, which was later converted into a bimonthly publication. In 1937, he resigned as chairman of the FoR but remained in close contact with the organization. In 1951, Wu announced that he was no longer a believer in the "principle of reconciliation." For more on Wu's connection to the "principle of reconciliation", see (Yao 2008).
- ⁸ This is an important judgment by Mr. Li Zehou concerning the trend of modern Chinese thought. For detailed discussion, see (Zehou Li 2008).
- ⁹ In a commemorative article on Y. T. Wu, Bishop K.H. Ting (also Ding Guangxun 丁光训) compared his thought to liberation theology, calling him "a forerunner in the evolution of Third World theology." For details, see (Ding 1982, p. 91).

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