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Stalinism and the Radicalisation of Wu Yaozong's American Liberal Christianity in Republican China

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No man has seen God *(1943) was the masterpiece of the Chinese Protestant theologian Wu Yaozong (1893–1979). This article retraces Wu's leftward intellectual turn in the preceding years, which culminated in the book's attempt to reconcile Christianity and Communism. Originally a follower of American liberal Christianity, Wu embraced Stalinism after the mid-1930s. His case testifies to an alternative afterlife of American liberal Christianity, the Socialist character of which had become moribund in America, but found new vitality in China through Wu's Stalinist reappropriation. Today, Wu's development of the American liberal tradition lives on in different Chinese Christian communities worldwide.*

On a snowy day in January 1997, almost two decades after his death, Wu Yaozong's ashes were interred at the Protestant cemetery in Beijing. Wu had served on the staff of the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) since 1919, rising to national fame for his work among progressive Christian students and his increasingly Socialist political outlook. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949, Wu spearheaded the Protestant world's co-operation with the new party-state. As the founding president of the state-controlled

CCP = Chinese Commuist Party; *Works* = 吳耀宗全集 [Complete works of Wu Yaozong], ed. Ying Fuk-sang, Hong Kong 2015–20; YMCA = Young Men's Christian Association

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Protestant Church, Wu participated in the party-state's mass expulsion of foreign missionaries and crackdown on nonconforming denominations. Reporting on the interment of his ashes in 1997, the mouthpiece of the state-controlled Protestant Church – *Tianfeng* magazine – applauded Wu's life as one of 'patriotism and faithfulness'.[1] But only several months earlier, an academic study in Hong Kong had concluded 'without a shred of doubt that [Wu] was either a heretic or a pagan'.[2]

Such polarised and politicised assessments tend to obscure Wu's standing as a leading theologian of his time. His theological masterpiece *No man has seen God*, published in Chinese in 1943, underwent five successive editions before the Communist victory in 1949. In the decade preceding its publication, Wu's political thought had taken a visible turn to the left, as his early commitment to Western individualism gave way to Stalinist collectivism. In *No man has seen God*, Wu supplied a theological foundation for this newfound political radicalism, especially by articulating a new understanding of God.

In this article, I explore how Wu's new understanding of God in *No man has seen God* emerged out of his political turn to Stalinism. I argue that Wu's Stalinist turn led to a creative development of the tradition of American liberal Christianity, one that preserved and strengthened its Socialist character in the Chinese context, at a time when that character had become moribund in America. This episode in the history of Chinese Christianity opens up a global dimension in existing scholarship on American liberal Christianity. I consider American liberal Christianity not in relation to the American intellectual scene, but as a subject in its own right and as a delocalised intellectual tradition in the global discourse on Christian Socialism. In this sense, Wu's development of the American tradition joined the voices of colleagues worldwide in a global community of theologians, together negotiating and expanding the meaning of Christian Socialism.

Wu's conversion to Christianity in 1919 inducted him into this global theological scene, where he was active for the next three to four decades. The theological world at this time was divided by the opposing schools of liberalism and fundamentalism. The fundamentalists upheld the inerrancy of the Bible and took an uncompromising attitude towards what they perceived as orthodox doctrines. Meanwhile, Wu's theological formation in the 1920s took place in the tradition of American liberal Christianity.[3]

[1] '帶領中國信徒走愛國愛教的道路': Mu Yi, '永享安息 – 記吳耀宗先生骨灰安葬儀式' [Eternal rest – interment ceremony of Mr Wu Yaozong's ashes], 天風 [*Heavenly Wind*], no. 3 (1997), 19–20.

[2] '我們可以毫不猶豫地斷定他是異端或異教者': Leung Ka-lun, 吳耀宗三論 [Three essays on Wu Yaozong], Hong Kong 1996, 136.

[3] For instance, Wu Yaozong, '紐約生活一瞥' [A glimpse of New York life], 真理週刊 [*Truth Weekly*] second anniversary special issue (29 Mar. 1925), 7–9, *Works*, i. 223–7 at p. 225.

This tradition could be said to consist of two interdependent elements: a liberal theology that re-evaluated received doctrines according to Enlightenment rationality, and a social gospel movement that sought to apply Christ's teachings to social, political and individual life. But as China's national crises intensified in the mid-1930s, Wu turned away from America and towards the example of Stalinism, particularly under the influence of several books describing daily life in Stalinist Russia and Chinese Communist enclaves. His political outlook gradually shifted from individualism to collectivism, whereby the subjection of individual interests to collective needs overtook the cultivation of individual morality as the priority of social change.

This political turn to the left led Wu to rework his theological understanding of God in the 1940s. In *No man has seen God*, Wu set aside his former sympathies with William James's idea of a finite God and, instead, articulated a panentheistic understanding of God, which he derived from a critical modification of Spinoza's pantheism.[4] Spinoza's pantheism accentuated God's immanence by construing God's presence and activity as identical with the processes of nature. But while Wu appeared to follow Spinoza's identification of God with nature, he also reasserted God's transcendence – that is, God's independence beyond the limitations of the universe. Because of this resistance to what he saw as Spinoza's overemphasis on God's immanence, Wu's understanding of God differed from Spinoza's pantheism and, instead, may be classed as a form of panentheism – the view that God is both in everything and above everything.

Wu's political and theological changes were the outcome of serious and prolonged intellectual explorations, beginning in the mid-1930s, when China was suffering from Japan's full-scale invasion in the Second World War, corruption in the ruling Nationalist Party and an impending Communist revolution. Some scholars have thus considered Wu's leftward turn as a response to these volatile social and political circumstances.[5] More politicised commentaries in this vein, often put forward by Wu's fundamentalist critics, have implied that Wu was an opportunist. According to this view, Wu's changes since the mid-1930s – especially those after the 1949 Communist victory – were calculated manoeuvres to gain favour in the party-state in order to persecute his fundamentalist opponents.[6] In contrast, my treatment of *No man has seen God* joins several existing studies

[4] Not all theologians agree that Spinoza was a pantheist. See, for instance, R. Mason, *The God of Spinoza: a philosophical study*, Cambridge 1997, and S. Nadler, 'Baruch Spinoza', in E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman (eds), *The Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy*, Stanford, CA 2025, at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2025/entries/spinoza/>.

[5] For instance, Ng Lee-ming, 基督教與中國社會變遷 [Christianity and Chinese social change], Hong Kong 1981, ch. ii.

[6] For instance, Wang Changxin's biography of Wu's fundamentalist opponent Wang Mingdao: 又四十年 [Another forty years], Toronto 1997.

in showing that Wu's changes proceeded from over two decades of rigorous and painstaking deliberation.[7] External circumstances were no doubt important, but they did not simply create political demands to which Wu responded in an unprincipled and opportunistic manner. Rather, they could be understood as experiences that shaped Wu's reading repertoire and personal preferences, which in turn factored into his intellectual development.

Wu's carefully deliberated leftward turn was symptomatic of an entire generation of Chinese intellectuals. But what makes Wu's case especially interesting was how his early commitment to American liberal Christianity paved the way for his later Stalinism. These two seemingly disparate traditions shared certain assumptions about the laws of the universe and the remedy to capitalism. Wu's Stalinist turn thus did not entail an abandonment of American liberal Christianity, but marked an original development and creative reappropriation of its original political implications from a Stalinist perspective.

A Stalinist reappropriation of American liberal Christianity

Wu's Stalinist reappropriation of American liberal Christianity indicates an alternative afterlife of this American tradition in China's specific context. Recent studies have suggested that liberal Christianity declined in America because it took on a certain measure of political conservatism in the twentieth century. In the mid-nineteenth century, liberal Christianity was spearheaded by working-class Americans of different races and genders, who were staunchly committed to Socialist ideals.[8] But, as Heath Carter and Janine Drake have shown, when liberal Christianity became mainstream among affluent urban churches at the turn of the twentieth century, the rise of white, middle-class, male clerics to positions of authority upended its genuinely Socialist character.[9] Although these new leaders continued to

[7] Ng, *Christianity and Chinese social change*, 117f; Leung, *Three essays on Wu Yaozong*, 11; Chin Ken-pa, '吳耀宗的「唯物主義基督教」與中國現代性批判' [Wu Yaozong's 'materialist Christianity' and the criticism of Chinese modernity], 道風 [*Winds of the Dao*] xxxvi (2012), 37–65.

[8] For instance, R. E. Luker, *The social gospel in black and white: American racial reform, 1885–1912*, Chapel Hill, NC 1998; W. J. D. Edwards and C. D. S. Gifford (eds), *Gender and the social gospel*, Champaign, IL 2003; and E. Blue, *St Mark's and the social gospel: Methodist women and civil rights in New Orleans, 1895–1965*, Knoxville, TN 2011.

[9] H. W. Carter, *Union made: working people and the rise of social Christianity in Chicago*, Oxford 2015; J. G. Drake, *The gospel of Church: how mainline Protestants vilified Christian Socialism and fractured the labor movement*, Oxford 2023; cf. G. Dorrien, *American democratic Socialism: history, politics, religion, and theory*, New Haven, CT 2021, chs ii–iii, which argues that most social gospellers were genuine Socialists.

use Socialist language throughout the Wilson years, they effectively pursued a conservative political agenda of perpetuating old hierarchies. Christopher Evans has proposed an alternative chronology of decline. For him, liberal Christianity survived the Truman years but dwindled during the Reagan presidency of the 1980s.[10] As fundamentalist Christians aligned themselves with right-wing politics and launched movements such as the 'Moral Majority', fundamentalism's activist zeal soon overtook liberal Christianity's call for social consciousness.

But while the different waves of political conservatism in the Wilson, Truman and Reagan years weakened liberal Christianity's Socialist character in America, in China, Wu preserved and strengthened its Socialist character by developing liberal Christianity's political tenets along Stalinist lines. As such, *No man has seen God* demonstrates that the intellectual trajectory of American liberal Christianity was not just towards a slow and painful death, but, in the case of China, towards a regeneration by a 'rebaptism' in the waters of Stalinism.

Wu's Stalinist reappropriation of American liberal Christianity laid the intellectual foundation for his co-operation with the CCP after 1949. Since then, Wu's entanglements with the party-state have made him a prominent subject in both Chinese and English-speaking scholarship, which has approached his ideas from a number of different historical and theological perspectives. The Taiwanese scholar Chin Ken-pa has situated Wu in the modernity discourse and suggested that his Stalinist turn emerged from a desire to build a modern China free from imperialism and capitalism.[11] In Hong Kong, Ying Fuk-tsang has systematically reconstructed Wu's theological positions, highlighting how Wu saw Christianity's relationship with Marxism as a 'critical juxtaposition', in which the two confronted and renewed each other.[12] In the English-speaking world, Thomas Reilly has contextualised Wu in the YMCA's organisational history, demonstrating how Wu's changes coincided with the YMCA's shifting institutional identity.[13] Jessie Sun's group intellectual biography has placed Wu among a generation of Chinese Christian intellectuals grappling with the tension between nationalism and Christian cosmopolitanism.[14]

[10] C. H. Evans, *The social gospel in American religion: a history*, New York 2017.

[11] Chin, 'Wu Yaozong's "materialist Christianity"'.

[12] Ying Fuk-tsang, '烈火洗禮中的基督教 – 抗戰時期吳耀宗對基督教與共產主義關係的探索' [Christianity baptised in fire – Wu Yaozong's exploration of Christianity and Communism in the Second Sino-Japanese War], in Lee Kam Keung and Lau Yee Cheung (eds), 烈火中的洗禮 – 抗日戰爭時期的中國教會*(1937–1945)* [Baptised in fire – the Chinese Church in the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945)], Hong Kong 2011, 39–70.

[13] T. Reilly, *Saving the nation: Chinese Protestant elites and the quest to build a new China, 1922–1952*, Oxford 2020, ch iii.

[14] J. Z. Sun, *Salvation and revolution: a twentieth century odyssey of the Chinese Protestant mind*, Oxford 2025, ch ii.

In what follows, I furnish these narratives with a more specific analysis of the several Stalinist works that influenced Wu. I do not emphasise, as Chin, the ideological reasons for Wu's changes, or, as Ying, the theological logic of those changes. Rather, mine is a study of intellectual influence, tracing the process by which Wu's readings and reflections led to his changes. Building on Sun's analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr's theological influence on Wu, I likewise go beyond Wu's political thought and consider how his reading of Stalinist works reshaped his theology.[15] While American liberal Christianity had been defanged in its birthplace, in China it continued on a Socialist trajectory through Wu's Stalinist reappropriation, living on to this day as part of the party-state's endorsed version of Christian orthodoxy.

American liberal Christianity and Wu's early ideas

By the time of Wu's conversion to Christianity in 1919 in Beijing, white, middle-class, male clerics in America had spun American liberal Christianity's political outlook in an individualist direction. In their eyes, the priority and purpose of social change was for the individual to have free use of his agency to cultivate a moral personality. Wu was initially drawn to Christianity by precisely this promise – made by American YMCA missionaries – that such individual cultivation could save China from its national crises.

From 1925 to 1927, and again in 1937, the YMCA twice funded Wu to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York. His encounter at Union with the works of Walter Rauschenbusch and Harry Emerson Fosdick further committed him to American liberal Christianity's individualist politics. Though Rauschenbusch had died in 1918, his work had such a long-lasting impact on Wu that he quoted Rauschenbusch in large portions in Chinese in his 1934 collection of essays, *Social gospel*. Fosdick, then professor of practical theology at Union, was a more proximate presence. Yet more than his teaching, Fosdick was perhaps remembered by Wu for his virtuoso sermons on the social gospel at New York's First Presbyterian Church, which Wu visited in 1925.[16]

Rauschenbusch and Fosdick inherited nineteenth-century American liberal Christianity's collectivist rhetoric, which implied that a group's corporate sin and salvation may be of greater moral salience than the individual's free, often selfish, choices. But scholars of Rauschenbusch have noted a tension in his thought – between his Socialist language of institutional change and his call for Christians to follow Christ in personal

[15] Ibid.

[16] Wu, 'A glimpse of New York life', *Works*, i. 225.

discipleship.[17] Rauschenbusch and Fosdick suggested that there existed 'supra-personal' agents of sin in the form of exploitative institutions, but they ultimately asserted that social change should both begin with and end in the salvation of each individual.[18] In *Social gospel*, Wu echoed this idea of corporate sin and salvation. The institutional nature of Chinese capitalism, he wrote, demanded more radical institutional reforms than the YMCA's agenda of individual cultivation.[19] But Wu also insisted that Communism was inferior to Christianity, because Communism 'emphasises the value of the collective man, not the individual'.[20]

Wu's political thought before the mid-1930s thus fell in line with Rauschenbusch's and Fosdick's version of American liberal Christianity, whose collectivist rhetoric concealed a measure of individualism. But Wu's theology in this period, especially his understanding of God, differed notably from theirs and, instead, drew extensively on William James. James did not strictly belong to the tradition of American liberal Christianity, but Wu interpreted James's understanding of God as a theological justification for liberal Christianity's programme of individual cultivation, indeed one more coherent than that offered by Rauschenbusch and Fosdick.

For Rauschenbusch and Fosdick, God's immanence in the universe signified an interdependence among all individuals, which in turn pointed to individual cultivation as a necessary first step for forging a better shared humanity. If God directs the course of the universe as an omnipotent creator and sustainer, then the world is an interlinked entity, in which each individual's sin and salvation affects the entirety of humankind.[21] As a result, individual cultivation is indispensable to and inseparable from the collective salvation of humanity. However, one may potentially suggest that Rauschenbusch's and Fosdick's insistence on God's omnipotence – that is, his all-powerfulness – implies a measure of determinism. God's omnipotence means he has absolute divine agency to shape human choices, though he might not always do so. Nevertheless, it is God's goodness, not human choices, that is the fundamental cause for individuals to pursue self-cultivation.

In contrast, James's understanding of God permitted a larger role for human choices in self-cultivation. James saw God as a finite being, one force among others in a 'pluralistic universe'. In his 1927 MA thesis submitted to

[17] D. E. Smucker, *Origins of Walter Rauschenbusch's social ethics*, Montreal 1994, 143; C. H. Evans, *The kingdom is always but coming: a life of Walter Rauschenbusch*, Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge 2004, p. xx.

[18] W. Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the social crisis*, London 1907, 351–32; H. E. Fosdick, *Christianity and progress*, London 1922, 225–8.

[19] Wu Yaozong, 社會福音 [Social gospel], *Works*, ii/2, 112–248 at p. 138.

[20] '共產主義所看重的是大眾 (Collective Man) 的價值, 而非個人 (Individual) 的價值': ibid. 207.

[21] For instance, Fosdick, *Christianity and progress*, 226ff.

Union Theological Seminary, entitled 'William James's doctrine of religious belief', Wu rehearsed James's understanding of a finite God in these words:

> The idea of a practical and rational necessity easily leads James to the doctrine of a limited God. God's nature is such as to call forth our active responses … 'God, in the religious life of ordinary men, is the name, not the whole, of things, but only the ideal tendency of things. He works in an external environment, has limits, has enemies.'[22]

While Wu did not explicitly endorse James's view, he was certainly sympathetic. For James, the purpose of scholarship was to advocate a moral life.[23] This aspiration no doubt appealed to Wu, whose version of American liberal Christianity similarly sought to cultivate a moral personality. James also believed that the individual's capacity for free choice was an essential condition for leading a moral life. He thus understood God in such a way as to assert the importance of human agency against the liberal view's potentially deterministic implications.[24] According to a Jamesian reading of liberal theology, if an omnipotent God directs the course of the universe, then human choices may not have the capacity to improve or impair the morality of individual life. But a finite God, who lacks omnipotence and is one being among others, must struggle himself to bring good into the world, and requires human co-operation for his success.[25] In other words, James's finite God does not possess absolute divine agency to shape human choices. Rather, God invites and persuades us to use our choices and actions to help him realise his will, which is to bring forth good in the universe.[26]

Wu's political turn to Stalinist collectivism after the mid-1930s

As the 1930s progressed, a nationwide enthusiasm in China for Stalinist Russia introduced Wu to several books on daily life in the Soviet Union and

[22] Wu Yaozong, 'William James's doctrine of religious belief', unpubl. MA diss. New York 1927, *Works*, i. 583–610 at p. 592. Wu's quotation is from W. James, *A pluralistic universe*, New York 1909, 124.

[23] J. Weidenbaum, 'William James's argument for a finite theism', in J. Diller and A. Kasher (eds), *Models of God and alternative ultimate realities*, Dordrecht 2013, 323–31 at p. 324.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid. 327.

[26] R. Faber, 'Introduction to process theology', in *Models of God and alternative ultimate realities*, 311–21 at p. 315. On James's finite theism, see, among many others, R. M. Gale, *The divided self of William James*, Cambridge 1999, and D. C. Lamberth, 'Interpreting the universe after a social analogy: intimacy, panpsychism, and a finite God in a pluralistic universe', in R. A. Putnam (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to William James*, Cambridge 2006, 237–59.

in CCP territories. These accounts led his political thought away from individualism and towards Stalinist collectivism. Like American liberal Christianity's collectivist rhetoric, Stalinist collectivism assumed that the good of the many was more important than individual freedom. But Stalinism did not view individual cultivation as the foremost means and ultimate purpose of social change. Instead, it demanded the complete submission of individual freedom to collective needs and valued individual cultivation insofar as it enabled self-surrender.

Wu's introduction to Stalinism came from interactions with his students – young Chinese Christians active in the progressive social and political movements to 'save the nation'. As the Chinese YMCA's director of publications in the 1930s in Shanghai, Wu's work required him to keep a close eye on intellectual movements among young Christian students, in order to commission publications that would speak to their needs. The CCP's urban underground activities at the time had amassed a sizable group of Communist sympathisers that included young Christians.[27] In an English report for the 1931 *China Christian year book*, Wu documented this trend among his students: 'In the past, names like John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, J. B. Shaw, Tolstoy and Tagore carried a good deal of weight among students; but now students have turned their attention to men like Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Gorky, Bukharin, Lanucharsky, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, Scott Nearing and so on.'[28]

This Communist turn among Wu's students is reflected in a 'Reading list for the self-study of Christian youth', which Wu compiled in 1940. Though published in Christian periodicals, Wu's reading list featured a number of Stalinist works, reflecting his own growing interest in the topic since the mid-1930s.[29] One important item was Henri Barbusse's biography of Stalin – *Staline: un monde nouveau vu à travers un homme* – originally commissioned by the Soviet Politburo as a propaganda piece for an international audience. However, in the preface to the book's Chinese edition, the translator Xu Maoyong – a member of the CCP's League of Left-wing Writers – made no mention of its propagandist nature.[30] The book's message was that Stalin's perfect personality did not come from his political prowess or military talent, but from his wilful surrender of his life

[27] For instance, J. Bond, *Dreaming the new woman: an oral history of missionary schoolgirls in Republican China*, Oxford 2023.

[28] Wu Yaozong, 'Movement among Chinese students', *China Christian year book* (1931), 259–74, *Works*, i. 513–28 at p. 519.

[29] Idem, '基督教青年自修閱讀書目' [Reading list for the self-study of Christian youth], 消息 [*Digest*] xiii (Apr. 1940), 8, repr. in 角聲 [*Bugle*] ii (June 1940), 31, *Works*, ii/1, 597–8.

[30] Henri Barbusse, 從一個人看一個新世界 [A new world seen through one man], trans. Xu Maoyong, Shanghai 1936.

to the Communist cause. In a veiled analogy between Stalin and God, Barbusse wrote that Stalin's life 'reminded [us] of the simple yet beautiful words of Seneca: "*Deo non pareo sed adsentior*" – "I do not obey God, but all my thoughts are the same as his."'[31] Stalin's life thus offered a glorious example for every individual to imitate – to fulfil the purpose of life by practising complete self-surrender.

Wu suggested that his Christian students read Barbusse's *Staline* alongside a Chinese book about life in Stalinist Russia, by his friend, the successful publisher and CCP ally Zou Taofen.[32] Zou's book, in the form of a travel journal, detailed his visits across the Soviet Union in 1934 during a summer school organised by Moscow University. Zou was particularly attracted to Stalinist Russia's collectivist social and political arrangements. In one vignette, he painted a rosy picture of Moscow's Freager Plant, where individual workers formed a trust to represent their collective interests.[33] The trust then returned the factory's entire profit to the workers, unlike in a capitalist society, where the owner extracted a surplus value. In Zou's eyes, Stalinist Russia's prosperity was the result of individual citizens surrendering their interests to the collective in all quarters of life.

Yet it was another item on the reading list – the American journalist Edgar Snow's *Red star over China* – that offered a compelling case for Stalinist collectivism's relevance to China. In 1926, Snow was hand-picked by the CCP to visit its territories in north-west China. The CCP's meticulously orchestrated tour bore fruit in Snow's English manuscript, which, like Barbusse's *Staline*, was carefully vetted by the party to produce the best possible propaganda piece.[34] When the book was translated into Chinese in 1938 by the CCP-friendly Revival Society, of which Wu was a board member, it rapidly captivated urban youth and became an instant bestseller.[35]

The Revival Society was one of several leftist study groups Wu joined in the 1930s alongside his YMCA employment. Like many other Christian intellectuals, Wu was attracted to these groups by their support for China's war of resistance against Japan. He soon numbered among his friends prominent leftists such as Zou Taofen himself, the novelist Zheng Zhenduo, the educationalist Li Gongpu and the CCP undercover agent Yan Baohang.[36] Reading Snow in this company showed Wu that Stalinist collectivism offered the best organisational structure for China's war efforts.

[31] '我們想起了哲學家塞納卡的簡潔美麗的語言: "*Deo non pareo sed adsentior*" – 「我並不服從上帝, 只是我所想的和他的相同。」': ibid. 304.

[32] Zou Taofen, 萍踪寄語三集 [Messages of floating duckweed, volume three], Shanghai 1937.

[33] Ibid. 18off.

[34] J. Lovell, *Maoism: a global history*, London 2019, ch. ii.

[35] Edgar Snow, 西行漫記 [Red star over China], trans. Wang Changqing and others, Shanghai 1938.

[36] Shen Derong, 吳耀宗小傳 [Short biography of Wu Yaozong], Shanghai 1989.

In Snow's description of CCP territories, centrally organised competitions encouraged soldiers to improve combat skills, and political study sessions enforced conformity to the party line. These collectivist arrangements, Snow observed, gave the Chinese Red Army an impressive level of coherence in combat. At a time when resistance against Japan was the nation's priority, these accounts of collective life persuaded Wu that individual interests could – and frequently should – be subjected to collective needs.

A new understanding of God in No man has seen God

Soon after Wu's political turn to Stalinist collectivism, in the 1940s his theological understanding of God underwent a concomitant change. One way to make sense of Wu's theological change is by unpacking the potential limit of James's finite God in justifying Stalinism's more stringent requirement for self-surrender. Although Wu did not explicitly state so, his theology after his political turn rested on the assumption that the universal implementation of Stalinist collectivism was God's will. God wishes humans to live good lives, but, for Wu now, a good life is one of complete self-surrender in a collectivist society. James's finite God, however, lacks omnipotence and can only persuade the individual to co-operate with him. God thus has no absolute causal power to shape human choices so that they would advance his vision of a collectivist society.

An external intellectual threat further compounded this theological difficulty. In the mid-1930s, Marxist dialectical materialism, which had first arrived in China after the October Revolution of 1917, was rapidly gaining popularity. In his 1940 reading list, where he introduced Chinese Christian youth to Barbusse, Zou and Snow, Wu also included Ai Siqi's 1936 *Popular philosophy*, noting that the book 'used the most accessible language to explain the main views of New Philosophy'.[37] This 'New Philosophy' denoted a specific school of Marxism, which had recently become Stalinist Russia's philosophical orthodoxy. Ai's book, which used quotidian language and everyday life examples, was a deliberate attempt to transmit the Stalinist philosophical canon to the Chinese public.[38]

Wu encouraged his politically active Christian students to engage with this ascendant trend, but he was also uneasy about it. The popularity of pamphlets in Ai's style, Wu thought, led Chinese Christian youth to

[37] '以極通俗的文字介紹新哲學之主要觀點': Wu, 'Reading list for the self-study of Christian youth', *Works*, ii/1, 598.

[38] For instance, J. Fogel, *Ai Ssu-Ch'i's contribution to the development of Chinese Marxism*, Cambridge, MA 1987; N. Knight, 'The role of philosophers to the Chinese Communist movement: Ai Siqi, Mao Zedong and Marxist philosophy in China', *Asian Studies Review* xxvi (2002), 419–45.

uncritically accept the atheism implicit in Marxist dialectical materialism.[39] In the ensuing years, Wu threw himself into developing a new theological system, which would show that dialectical materialism need not intrinsically entail atheism, but could also affirm God's existence. The result was his most original and systematic theological work – *No man has seen God* – published in 1943. The book shared the accessible style of Ai's *Popular philosophy*, but argued that dialectical materialism was compatible on a theoretical level with belief in a Christian God.

Wu sought to reconcile this apparent incompatibility by articulating a new understanding of God, which also alluded to a complex account of divine agency – neither of which may always seem clear to the contemporary reader. Wu's new understanding of God eschewed James's finite view and, instead, approximated a form of panentheism – the view that God is both in everything and beyond it. But Wu illustrated this newfound panentheism indirectly, by modifying Spinoza's pantheism.[40] In an unusual interpretative move, Wu assumed the identity of Spinoza's God as the Christian God. 'In seventeenth-century Europe', he wrote at the beginning of *No man has seen God*, 'there was a unique philosopher called Spinoza, whose understanding of God had some fundamental similarities with ours [i.e. Christians].'[41] For Wu, Spinoza's pantheism held that '[p]henomena of the universe, variable as they are, are penetrated by one, universal truth … Religion gives this unifying thing the name of God'.[42] God is thus not merely immanent in the universe, but identical to the processes of nature.

At a time when Socialist pamphlets promoted dialectical materialism's implicit atheism against theism, Wu argued that Spinoza's pantheistic understanding of the Christian God shared with dialectical materialism the fundamental belief that the universe was united by objective laws. The Christian God thus does not conflict with dialectical materialism, because both schools maintain that all matter in the universe objectively exists, is knowable to the human mind and can be examined through the scientific method.[43]

However, Wu proceeded in *No man has seen God* to modify Spinoza's pantheist understanding of God into a form of panentheism. Wu was

[39] Wu Yaozong, 'Marx and Jesus through Chinese eyes', *Radical Religion* ii (June 1937), 17–20, *Works*, ii/1, 431–6 at p. 435.

[40] Xie Fuya, '吳耀宗與斯賓諾莎哲學 – 記吳氏宗教思想轉變的關鍵' [Wu Yaozong and Spinoza's philosophy – a key change in Wu's religious thought], 景風 [*Ching Feng*] lxxii (1983), 1–7.

[41] '在十七世紀的歐洲, 有一位很特出的哲學家名叫斯賓諾莎, 他的上帝觀和我們所提出的上帝觀, 在基本上有一些相同之處': Wu Yaozong, 沒有人看見過上帝 [No man has seen God], 5th edn, Shanghai 1948, *Works*, iii/2, 2–103 at p. 34.

[42] '宇宙的現象, 雖然是萬殊的, 但貫澈這萬殊現象的, 卻只有一個普遍的真理 … 宗教對這個一元的東西, 稱之曰「上帝」': ibid. 22.

[43] Ibid.

cautious of Spinoza's overemphasis on God's immanence, because Wu believed God's transcendence – his independence from the universe – offered unique insights unavailable to Spinoza. 'Spinoza's understanding of God', Wu explained, 'is known as pantheism; but the Christian God adds something more to this view.'[44] Wu then painted a picture of God with two dimensions – the 'horizontal' and 'vertical': 'The horizontal aspect of God is what theology calls "immanence" – the internal and the visible of the universe. The vertical aspect of God is what theology calls his "transcendence", meaning that which is beyond all things.'[45] For Wu, Spinoza's pantheism only captured God's horizontal, immanent dimension, while the Christian understanding encompassed both this and the vertical, transcendental dimension.

Wu's understanding of God is discernibly panentheistic due to the centrality he assigned to the vertical – that is, transcendental – dimension. Unlike Spinoza's pantheism, which heavily emphasised God's immanence, Wu's addition of the vertical dimension meant God was both immanent in and transcendent beyond the universe. But for Wu, God's transcendence did not manifest itself in the ability to defy objective laws and perform miracles, because these were irrational elements of Christianity that he, like American liberal theologians, wanted to downplay. Rather, God's transcendence can be seen in his often incomprehensible will, which may appear opposite to the temporal moral outlook of humans. Wu illustrated this with a verse from the Gospel of Matthew (xvi.25): 'For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it':

> In this verse, 'save his life' is the horizontal perspective, because it only sees the surface, current, individual need. But the result of such an attitude is the diametric opposite of what is intended … Meanwhile, to 'lose his life for my sake' is only a loss when one takes the temporal, horizontal perspective, but from Jesus' vertical perspective, it is not to 'lose', but to 'find' life.[46]

God's transcendence is thus manifested in his otherworldly moral outlook, which, in Wu's words, 'transcends humans' subjective standards of good and bad'.[47]

Wu's new understanding of God – which we have interpreted as panentheism – was the result of his political turn to Stalinist collectivism. But in

[44] '斯賓諾莎的上帝觀 … 是所謂的汎神論。但基督教的上帝觀, 卻在這上面加了一些東西': ibid. 35.

[45] '上帝橫的方面, 就是神學所謂「內在」的 (Immanent) 上帝。所謂「內在」的, 就是在宇宙間可見的, 萬象之內的意思。上帝縱的方面, 就是神學所謂「超然」的 (Transcendent) 上帝, 所謂「超然」的, 就是超乎萬物之外的意思': ibid. 35–6.

[46] '在這句話裡面, 「要救自己生命的」是橫的看法, 因為他只看到表面的, 目前的, 個人的需要。但是這一個態度所得到的結果, 和他所期望的結果剛剛相反 … 同樣的, 「為我喪掉生命的, 」從一般人橫的觀點來看, 只是「喪掉」而已, 但是從耶穌縱的觀點來看, 它並不是「喪掉」, 而是「救了生命。」': ibid. 37.

[47] '超乎人的主觀的愛惡': ibid. 71.

No man has seen God, Wu did not systematically articulate why, compared to James's finite God, his panentheistic God better justified Stalinism's call for unconditional individual surrender. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct a complex account of divine agency from Wu's text that may provide an answer.

The horizontal – that is, immanent – dimension of Wu's panentheistic God denied what we may call 'meaningful' human agency to defy God, enabling God to enforce his will and implement collectivism. Wu's partial adoption of Spinoza's pantheism implied that God, being identical with the universe, has absolute divine agency and, through the spontaneous unfolding of himself, shapes human choices and the course of the world. Consequently, humans have no 'meaningful' agency to choose a course of action contrary to God's will, since their choices are tantamount to God's. Back in the 1920s, when Wu was still committed to an unmodified American liberal Christianity, he would have objected to this gross denial of human agency. But for him now, it was not bad that meaningful human agency did not exist under a pantheistic God: If human choices merely express the pantheistic God's self-unfolding, God can ensure that his interpretation of the good – that is, collectivism – is realised in the world.

Meanwhile, the vertical – that is, transcendental – dimension of Wu's panentheistic God alludes to the capacity of humans to identify and cooperate with God, but not to defy him – an idea we may operationally term as 'conceptual' human agency. Wu's reassertion of God's transcendence significantly diverged from Spinoza's equivalence of God with the universe and, consequently, re-introduced a certain distinction between God's choices and human choices. So, while humans have no 'meaningful' agency to defy God's absolute causal power, they might still possess limited, 'conceptual' agency to better or worse understand God's will and align their choices with it.

Wu's vertical dimension of God, therefore, is a theological idea that serves the political purpose of justifying Stalinist collectivism as God's will. The nature of Wu's understanding of God as a political instrument can be seen through Wu's discussion of prayer. While God's transcendence invites us to understand him through the mystical life of prayer, Wu did not see prayer as intrinsically valuable, but as a means to form obedient subjects in a collectivist society. Prayer, he wrote, 'liberates us from narrow horizons to absorb [God's] truth, beauty, and goodness'.[48] In a world where humans have no meaningful agency to defy God, mystical communion with him through prayer helps us become better instruments of his will. Ultimately, Wu did not consider his vertical dimension of God chiefly as a theological idea, but as an auxiliary to a political argument – namely, to reject 'meaningful' human agency and to assert the possibility for humans to exercise

[48] '從狹小的眼光中解放出來, 去吸收它的真善美': ibid. 79.

'conceptual' agency, so they could better submit to God's plan of a collectivist society.

After the CCP won the Chinese civil war in 1949, Wu's new understanding of God became the theological foundation for his leadership of the Protestant world's co-operation with the new party-state. However, when waves of mass political movements hit in the late 1950s, Wu had to recant his early affinity with American liberal Christianity.[49] The potential political repercussions of independent theological thinking were so severe that Wu ceased publishing systematic theological works, leaving *No man has seen God* one of his most important scholarly pieces. But even in this turbulent decade, Wu fell from the party-state's favour, not because his theology lacked a genuinely Socialist character, but because the CCP was increasingly dogmatic about Marxist dialectical materialism's implicit atheism. While the CCP approved of Wu's Stalinist collectivist politics, it could not accept his claim that dialectical materialism was reconcilable with theism.

Wu died in 1979, soon after his political rehabilitation, and he has since been extolled in party-state propaganda as a role model for Christian co-operation with the CCP. The consequence of this official endorsement is the inevitable presence of a political dimension in the reception of Wu's ideas in different parts of the Chinese Christian world. In mainland China, official seminaries have inherited Wu's liberal position in the liberal-fundamentalist divide. The CCP's directive for Christian institutions – that they construct an indigenous Chinese theology consistent with the Socialist worldview of science and rationality – can only be achieved by continuing to adopt Wu's flexible attitude towards Scripture, miracles and orthodoxy. Today, Wu's grave, having been moved from Beijing to Shanghai, receives annual visits from faculty and students of East China Theological Seminary. Their graveside orations and solemn laying of flowers evoke the imagery of pilgrimage, testifying to Wu's near-sainthood in the party-state's narrative.[50]

However, Wu's co-operation with the CCP has elicited a different evaluation among mainland China's independent house churches, which operate illicitly outside the party-state structure and often hold fundamentalist theological views. In a 2008 collection of essays, the prominent underground pastor Wang Yi suggested that Wu's liberal theological formation rendered him susceptible to CCP grooming.[51] This assessment emerged

[49] Wu Yaozong, '我對共產黨的認識' [My understanding of the Communist party], *Heavenly Wind* xii (1958), 11–12, *Works*, iv/1, 445–53.

[50] '華東神學院師生爲吳耀宗等基督教先輩們掃墓' [Faculty and students of East China Theological Seminary pay respect to the graves of Wu Yaozong and other Protestant pioneers], at <https://www.ccctspm.org/newsinfo/18883>, accessed 6 November 2025.

[51] Wang Yi, 與神親嘴 [Kissing God], 205ff at <https://www.wangyilibrary.org/post/《与神亲嘴》>, accessed 6 November 2025.

from Wang's own political theology, which read the Bible as inherently favouring a democratic constitution and opposed to China's Socialist one-party state. Wang paid a costly price for his views when, in 2019, he received a nine-year prison sentence for inciting subversion. Wang's case further demonstrates the importance of the liberal-fundamentalist divide in structuring the Chinese Christian world today. Unlike official seminaries' inheritance of Wu's liberal attitude, Wang's language throughout his collection of essays shows that he implicitly aligns himself with Wu's fundamentalist contemporary critics.

Recent years have also witnessed a steady rise in scholarly engagement with Wu's theological legacy both within and beyond the party-state structure. I have already noted the works of Sino-Christian theologians outside mainland China, such as Chin Ken-pa and Ying Fuk-tsang. On the mainland, Wu's original arguments in *No man has seen God* have likewise drawn sustained scholarly attention. These mainland studies have situated Wu in the Sinicisation paradigm of Chinese theology – a leading approach that highlights Chinese theologians' attempts to indigenise a seemingly Western religion. In official seminaries, scholar priests such as Chen Yongtao have studied *No man has seen God* as such a piece of contextual theology. For Chen, Wu Sinicised American liberal Christianity by integrating into it the practices and experiences of China's quest for national salvation, rather than by pure theorisation.[52] Tang Shiwen's 2019 monograph, published in Nanjing Theological Seminary's *Sinicisation of Christianity* series, has similarly suggested that Wu's reading of Niebuhr, James and Spinoza contains useful conceptual resources for developing a Sinicised theology today.[53]

Studies of Wu from a Sinicisation perspective have also flourished in mainland China's public universities and research institutes, among scholars who research Christianity, but may or may not themselves practise it. In her 2007 study of *No man has seen God*, Duan Qi – a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences – suggested that Wu Sinicised Christianity by echoing Daoism's emphasis on experiential knowledge in articulating his understanding of God.[54] With increasing scholarly exchange, mainland studies of Wu now effectively participate in common discourse

[52] Chen Yongtao, '大時代"中的神學思考 – 吳耀宗處境化的神學方法' [Theology in a time of crisis – Wu Yaozong's contextual theological methods], 金陵神學志 [*Nanjing Theological Review*] 1 (2009), 155–77.

[53] Tang Shiwen, 追求真理, 愛國愛教 – 吳耀宗神學思想及其實踐研究 [Seeking truth, loving nation and faith – a study of Wu Yaozong's theology and its implementation], Nanjing 2019.

[54] Duan Qi, '吳耀宗如何將基督教的上帝觀理性化 – 從《沒有人看見過上帝》一書談起' [How did Wu Yaozong rationalise the Christian understanding of God – an analysis beginning with *No man has seen God*], 宗教與民族 [*Religion and Ethnic Groups*] v (2007), 86–110.

with overseas scholarship. The Chinese University of Hong Kong's 2010 conference, 'Wu Yaozong and Chinese Christianity', brought together mainland scholars from both official seminaries and secular academia, alongside those from Hong Kong and the Anglophone world.[55] This collaborative engagement with Wu's ideas sets the stage for a more constructive project in philosophical theology – one that draws on the theological legacies of *No man has seen God* to articulate a new Socialist Chinese theology. This new theology will not only advance Chinese theology, but also holds the potential to shape Christian Socialist theology in other contexts.

Wu's case, therefore, not only indicates an unusual afterlife of the American liberal tradition in China's context, but also constitutes a Chinese contribution to the global discourse of Christian Socialism in the first half of the twentieth century. Christian Socialists worldwide believed that Christ's life and teachings called for a critique of capitalism and alluded to a communal and cooperative mode of organising economic production and social life. The American liberal voice in this global discourse was, no doubt, Wu's most immediate influence. But throughout Wu's *œuvre*, he also demonstrates an awareness of Christian Socialism's various global manifestations, such as Charles Kingsley's Anglican Socialism, Henry Hodgkin's Quaker pacifism, Leo Tolstoy's Christian anarchism and Toyohiko Kagawa's 'brotherhood economics' in Japan.[56] When faced with the choice between individualistic and collectivist politics, all these Christian Socialists gravitated towards affirming human agency. In Anglican Socialism, for instance, the call for co-operatives and guilds in England in the 1920s and '30s reflected a wish for individual agency to shape industrial management. Wu's Stalinist reappropriation of American liberal Christianity, which demanded the surrender of the individual's 'meaningful' agency, was an original and unique voice in this global discourse of Christian Socialism.

Wu's case is thus an instance of the way in which theological knowledge in the twentieth century was globally 'co-produced'.[57] Within a global

[55] A selection of conference papers were published as Ying Fuk-tsang (ed.), 大時代的宗教信仰: 吳耀宗與二十世紀中國基督教 [Abiding faith for a nation in crisis: Y. T. Wu and twentieth-century Chinese Christianity], Hong Kong 2011.

[56] For instance, Wu, 'William James's doctrine of religious belief', *Works*, i. 608; 'Can modern men be real Christians?', *Chinese Recorder* lx (Nov. 1929), *Works*, i. 359–64 at pp. 362–3; '關於唯愛主義的論戰' [The debate over pacifism], 微音 [*Lowly Voice*] ii (Apr. 1930), 170–5, *Works*, i. 395–99; '信仰的新大陸' [A new continent of faith], *Lowly Voice* ii (June 1936), *Works*, i. 401–18 at pp. 415–16.

[57] Among the vast body of literature on this topic see L. Jenco and J. Chappell, 'Introduction: history from between and the global circulation of the past in Asia and Europe, 1600–1950', *HJ* lxiv (2021), 1–16; H. Harrison, 'Naples, China, and the cosmos: the theology of an eighteenth-century Chinese priest', this Journal lxxv (2024), 480–98; and J. Lu, *Translingual Catholics: Chinese theologians before Vatican II*, Notre Dame, In 2025.

community of knowledge, Wu joined his colleagues worldwide to negotiate and expand the meaning of Christian Socialism. His contribution to this global republic of letters was informed by China's specific historical circumstances and increasing global connectivity. Faced with capitalist exploitation and Western imperialism, Chinese intellectuals were discerning whether Western liberalism or Stalinism was the best path for building a just and independent nation. Wu's incisive grasp of this national predicament enabled him to incorporate China's enthusiasm for Stalinist Russia into his reflections on American liberal Christianity. Thus, when liberal Christianity lost its Socialist character in America, Wu was able to preserve and even further radicalise it in China. His contribution to global Christian Socialism was, in this sense, both intellectually original and deeply rooted in the Chinese experience.