


Diversity, complementarity and synergy: The reception of ecological theology in China

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This article explores ecological theology in mainland China from 1990 to 2024 through the lens of Stephen B. Bevans' contextual theology. By analysing its reception, it becomes clear that a distinctly contextualised ecological theology has not yet emerged in China. Considering this gap, the article examines potential directions for Chinese ecological theology across four dimensions of contextual theology. The academic and religious communities should focus on diversified yet overlapping approaches to develop Chinese ecological theology collaboratively. From the perspective of mutual learning between Chinese and Western civilisations, Chinese ecological theology should adopt 'synthetic model' to integrate traditional Chinese concepts of 'Heaven-Nature-Human' and respond to both local and global challenges. A synthetic model of Chinese ecological theology could become a significant voice in the international theological community, contributing to global sustainable prosperity.

Contribution: This article makes two contributions. Firstly, it provides a systematic review and reflection on ecological theology in mainland China from 1990 to 2024. Secondly, it highlights the future development directions and models of Chinese ecological theology from the perspective of contextual theology.

Keywords: ecological theology; China; reception; contextual theology; diversity.

Introduction

Chinese ecological theology emerged from the assimilation and reinterpretation of the global ecological theology movement of the 1960s. Given China's historical emphasis on living in harmony with nature, largely untouched by the disenchantments of nature from modernity, it holds the potential to offer a distinctive contribution to the global ecological theology (Yang 2021:1–3). Therefore, the development of Chinese ecological theology carries significant weight in fostering a harmonious, balanced and sustainable relationship within Chinese church, society, and even on a global scale (Zhang 2023:7).

Ecological theology, closely intertwined with modernity and serving as a form of academic theology responding to contemporary economic, social and cultural frameworks, is ideally suited for implementation within theological institutions or religious studies departments in universities (eds. Hamilton, Gemenne & Bonneuil 2015:x–xi). This approach allows for the integration of diverse disciplinary perspectives on modernity. However, the absence of dedicated theological institutions or established departments of religious studies in Chinese universities has hindered the sustained advancement of discussions on ecological theology. Research on ecological theology is sporadically pursued by scholars in the humanities within Chinese universities, as well as by theological scholars in official seminaries.

This study aims to outline the various types and evolutionary paths of Chinese ecological theology, drawing on materials spanning from 1990 to 2024 and to analyse them through the lens of contextual theology to envision the future directions and potential forms of Chinese ecological theology.

Lai (2017:477–500) has evaluated the discourse on ecological theology within the Chinese-speaking world from the perspective of 'ecological theology as public theology'. He has not only explored ecological theology within mainland China but has also considered the insights of scholars from Hong Kong and Taiwan. He has identified three distinct positions in the public discourse on ecology in China: 'the government's political propaganda, the views derived from traditional Chinese culture, and the discourses articulated by environmental scientists and/or activists' (Lai 2017:478).

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However, recognising the unique academic landscape in mainland China, it becomes clear that the manifestation of ecological theology differs from that in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Therefore, focusing on materials specific to mainland China, exploring the reception history and developmental context of Chinese ecological theology, and conducting research through the lens of contextual theology are believed to offer a more fitting portrayal of the nuances, transformations, and future prospects of Chinese ecological theology within the mainland context.

The decision to analyse Chinese ecological theology through the lens of contextual theology in this article stems from three main reasons. Firstly, as highlighted by Lai (2017):

As the new generation of ecological theologians are even more open to the theological voices from the non-western world, Chinese Christian theologians may take this opportunity to widen their horizons and engage in dialogue with not only the theological voices from the western contexts, but also those from nonwestern contexts. (pp. 499–500)

There is potential to leverage diverse cultural and historical resources unique to China for the development of ecological theology – a key dimension of contextual theology (Bevans 2002:xvi).

Secondly, examining ecological theology through contextual theology proves beneficial for both Eastern and Western theological constructs. While Western theology traditionally originated from classical theological underpinnings, assumptions challenged by the enlightenment and postmodern theological developments have led to a reevaluation (Bergmann 2016:1–20). Classical theology is now viewed as a specialised form of contextual theology. By scrutinising Chinese ecological theology through a contextual theology lens, the field can break free from unilateral Western influences. This approach fosters the attainment of independent discourse. Moreover, Chinese ecological theology can play a pivotal role in prompting reverence and respect for nature, countering modernity's unchecked exploitation of nature's sanctity (McGrath 2002:182–185).

Lastly, while Chinese ecological theology is categorised within Sino-Christian theology as a form of cultural theology (Yeung 2019:20). There is an obvious deficiency in the emphasis on specific historical and social structures within Sino-Christian theology. Gao (2016:40) underscores this gap because of overlooking China's unique context, particularly the socioeconomic transformations stemming from market economy reforms since the 1980s. Given the environmental imperatives arising from global capitalist pursuits, a contextual theological analysis of Chinese ecological issues intertwined with market reforms stands to not only fortify the practical construction of Chinese contextual theology but also empower Sino-Christian theology to meaningfully contribute to China's environmental crisis.

Therefore, what are the contents, types, and characteristics of Chinese ecological theology? What discoveries can be made

about Chinese ecological theology from the perspective of contextual theology? In the following sections, this article will explore the historical backdrop of ecological theology's emergence, provide a comprehensive overview of Chinese ecological theology across research genres, and conduct an analysis from contextual theology.

Retrospective and overview of Chinese ecological theology

Ecological theology, a movement that took root in the West during the 1960s, has had a delayed reception within the Chinese Christian communities. Notably, it wasn't until 1985 that Taiwan saw the emergence of a work on ecological theology (Dai 1985). Meanwhile, mainland China was navigating a period of ideological liberation, fostering a revival in Christian studies. Despite a cultural resurgence in Christian scholarship during the 1980s, the predominant focus was on humanistic, political, and social issues, rather than direct engagement with Western ecological theological paradigms (Lam 2010:21–23).

In the post-1990s era, Chinese Christian scholarship gradually transitioned from a nationalist and humanistic emphasis towards a more professional academic trajectory. This shift facilitated a convergence with Western theological trends while cultivating unique scholarly concerns reflective of the Chinese context.

An overview category

The earliest documented exposition of Christian ecological thought within mainland China appears to be An's (1990:26–52) comprehensive analysis, which encompasses five key sections: (1) The Ecological Crisis as a Wake-Up Call, (2) Formulating Ecological Ethics, (3) Interpretations of the Creation Narrative, (4) Redemption and Liberation: The Interplay of Humans and Nature, and (5) The Significance of Ecological Theology.

An's scholarly contributions extend beyond this initial piece, as evidenced by subsequent articles (An 1998:22–26) and the introduction to Moltmann's eco-theological perspective in (An 1999:38–41). While An's writings exude the scholarly vibrancy of China's academic revival in the 1990s, they also exhibit areas for refinement in terms of adopting a more self-aware research methodology, and showcasing innovative insights.

As the 1990s unfolded and China embraced reform and openness on a national scale, the prevailing societal ethos shifted from cultural introspection to an economic-centric paradigm. Consequently, as environmental concerns surfaced amid economic development, Christian scholarship pivoted towards investigating the ecological implications of rapid economic growth (Yang 1994:78–85) was published in the section of 'market economics, and behavioral norms'. This sheds light on the attention given to the rationale behind market economics and corresponding environmental conservation within the political and economic landscape at

that time. The article categorises and evaluates the relationship between humans and nature in Christian ideology into three distinct paradigms: the 'dualistic separation of humans and nature', the 'equality theory emphasizing God as the link', and the 'stewardship theory advocating humans managing nature on behalf of God' (Yang 1994:85).

Subsequent scholarly endeavours, such as Sun (2001:78–82), Huang (2003:81–87), and Liang (2010b:51–55), have continued to introduce and succinctly appraise Western ecological theological discourses within the evolving landscape of Chinese Christian scholarship.

Case analysis category

A shift occurred around 2010 towards more detailed and profound analyses of specific ecological theologians rather than broad introductory articles. An example is Li's (2010: 93–100) exploration of feminist ecological theologian Rose Mary Radford Ruether's ecofeminist theological thoughts. Drawing from her dissertation (Li 2008), Li delves into Ruether's multifaceted approach, which encompasses Christian theology, feminism, ecology, religious dialogue and social movements. Ruether's ecofeminist theology advocates for the reformation of Christian tradition, critiques of social injustices, shifts in human perspectives, and openness to religious dialogues, fostering dialogue and collaboration across diverse positions and social forces. However, Ruether's theology also grapples with issues of 'utopianism' and lingering 'anthropocentrism' (Li 2010:89).

Ruether, a feminist theologian within the Catholic tradition, focuses on dismantling and reconstructing power dynamics related to ecological and gender concerns. Thomas Berry, another Catholic theologian, emphasises the profound development of ecological spirituality. Guo (2012:85–87) delves into Berry's ideas on natural ecological spirituality, tracing the origins of his ecological spiritual tradition and his critique of the desecralisation of nature and secularisation of human life stemming from Western modernity. Berry advocates for a rediscovery of awe towards nature and its sacred and mystical dimensions, guiding humans to revere nature and resist secularisation and consumerism resulting from the separation of spirit and matter. While some scholars criticise Berry for lacking specific recommendations for social action, Guo (2012:86–87) defends him, highlighting Berry's concrete proposals for political, legal, economic, educational and religious realms. However, it's crucial to notice the potential risk of Berry's expansive ecological spiritual vision diluting the religious essence of Catholicism.

Subsequently, Chinese scholars began exploring other ecological theologians, such as Sallie McFague (He 2020:249–269), and the rising interest in Orthodox ecological theology. Pan (2018:169–205) evaluates the cosmological underpinnings of ecological thoughts in *Laudato si'* from Maximus's perspective, while Li (2022:209–230) analyses Greek Orthodox ecological theology through biblical hermeneutics.

When examining comparative analyses of ecological theology, Liang (2010a:98–102) pioneered the use of 'intertextuality' theory to probe the relationship between ecological theology and ecological literature. He argues that both share holistic perspectives, a reverence for all life, and a critique of human-centric biases. Liang challenges an absolute rejection of 'anthropocentrism', proposing instead a 'relative anthropocentrism' that advocates for symbiosis between humans and nature, prioritising the overall welfare of the ecological world and respecting natural laws (Liang 2010: 101–102). His thoughts on anthropocentrism echo certain Chinese scholars' interpretations of Confucian environmental ethics (Lai 2001:35–55; Zhang 2024).

Given the interconnectedness of ecological theology and ecological literature, Chinese scholars are increasingly exploring the nexus between ecological theology and literature, particularly through an ecological theological lens when studying select literary works.

Application category

Zhang (2010:21–25) delves into the novel *Oh, Pioneers!* and its central figure, Alexander, through the lens of ecological theology. His aim is to elucidate the pathway towards establishing a harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. Alexander not only fulfils the divine mandate for humans to care for the earth but also transcends her own limitations. In her evolving understanding of nature, she progresses from a mindset of dominating the land to one of living in harmony with it. Through a journey of transformation in ecological spirituality, she intricately guides the land to realise its full potential through deliberate actions. Throughout this process, Alexandra achieves a moral elevation of embracing responsibility for all living beings, ultimately reaching a spiritual unity with the earth, embodying what can be described as a '*bene esse*' – a beautiful existence (Zhang 2010:24).

The focus on ecological poetry has also captured the attention of Chinese scholars. Chen (2010:55–61) suggests that Wendell Berry not only incorporates John Cobb's ecological theology of 'creative goodness of created goods' but also weaves through her works the theme of 'ecological holism', promoting communication and connection between humans and the natural world. Through the medium of literature, this advocacy has propelled the advancement of ecological ideologies (Chen 2010:55–61). Within the Chinese academic community, discussions have flourished regarding the interplay between ecological literature and ecological theology. For instance, Liu (2014:97–101) examines Wendell Berry's ecological concepts in *A Timbered Choir* through the lens of Moltmann's ecological theology, focusing on themes such as ecological creation theory, ecological views of nature and human liberation. Furthermore, there has been a rise in doctoral dissertations from Chinese universities that analyse William Faulkner's novels from an ecological theological perspective. Cai (2008) traces the origins of Western dualistic environmental thought, delves into Faulkner's communal

ideals, and highlights Faulkner's exploration of transcending the secular nature of time, aligning with Moltmann's aspiration to synchronise historical time with natural time.

It is worth noting that both cases employ Moltmann's ecological theology as a foundational theoretical framework. This choice is motivated by Moltmann's groundbreaking contributions to the field of ecological theology and the early introduction of his ideas in China.

Chinese eco-theology as contextual theology

Upon reviewing the literature, it becomes apparent that current studies on eco-theology in the Chinese academic sphere predominantly view eco-theology as a Western theological movement or an object of academic research. Chinese eco-theology has progressed from introductory overviews and case analyses to ecological literature. However, a distinctively Chinese eco-theology with a native perspective is yet to emerge within the academic community. While the theological discourse within the official church displays traces of eco-theology with autonomous awareness, it lacks a robust connection to the international theological landscape. Presently, there is an urgent need in China to strategically assimilate and internalise Western eco-theologies, subsequently adopting a Chinese standpoint. By following the path of cross-cultural exchange between Eastern and Western civilisations, it is imperative to critically assess the facets of Western modernity that underlie the ecological crisis. Given these circumstances, this article utilises the framework of contextual theology in conjunction with China's specific milieu to reflect on the current status of eco-theology in China and envision its potential trajectory.

As one of the proponents of contextual theology, Stephen B. Bevens (1944–) delineates contextual theology into six categories: the Translation model, Anthropological model, Praxis model, Synthetic model, Transcendental model and Countercultural model (Bevens 2002:37–138). Bevens' classification is founded upon four dimensions: (1) the spirit and message of the gospel, (2) the tradition of the Christian people, (3) the culture in which one is theologising and (4) social change within that culture (Bevens 2002:x). Therefore, in the light of China's current circumstances, which model should be adopted for the development of its ecological theology, and how should the relationships between the four dimensions be navigated when constructing ecological theology based on different models? This article will now provide an overview of Bevens' six types of contextual theology and elaborate on them in the context of China, with a particular emphasis on exploring the relationship between the synthesis model and Chinese ecological theology.

I will delineate six distinct models and then analyse the contextual theology model that aligns with the specific circumstances in Chinese academia and religious circles. Bevens highlights that the translation model strives to convey

the unchanging truths of the Gospel in a manner understandable across diverse cultural contexts, emphasising the use of language and symbols relevant to the target culture while preserving the core message. While there are risks of oversimplifying the Gospel or failing to fully engage with the depth of the cultural background, this model aims to uphold the fundamental identity of the religious faith (Bevens 2002:38–53). The anthropological model seeks to identify and affirm the presence of God within a culture, placing importance on cultural traditions and practices as vehicles of God's revelation. While this model may lead to syncretism by excessively accommodating cultural elements conflicting with Gospel values, it effectively uncovers universal grace and revelation in various cultures, thereby enhancing the communication of Gospel messages (Bevens 2002:55–69).

The praxis model aims to integrate faith and action, emphasising social justice and liberation. Inspired by liberation theology, this model engages in a reflective and action-oriented process, although it may prioritise social action over theological reflection (Bevens 2002:71–87). The synthetic model strives to balance Gospel information with cultural insights, drawing from a range of models. This model seeks a middle ground, appreciating tradition and cultural expressions, but it may be seen as lacking focus or being overly broad, potentially diluting the core message of Christianity (Bevens 2002:89–102).

The transcendental model underscores the importance of personal experience and transformation in understanding theology, focusing on individual consciousness and faith processes. However, this model may not sufficiently address the social or cultural dimensions of theology (Bevens 2002:103–116). The countercultural model challenges cultural norms through a prophetic and critical perspective, advocating for a transformative stance that questions and reforms societal values. Yet, this model may risk excessive opposition or indifference to positive cultural elements (Bevens 2002:118–138).

The six models mentioned all have their own strengths and weaknesses. Rather than debating the pros and cons of each model, the key is to select the suitable model for developing contextual theology based on different groups within various contexts. In the following, this article will discuss the corresponding contextual theology models based on the situations in China's church and academic circles, focusing particularly on elaborating on Chinese contextual theology through the lens of the synthesis model.

Concerning 'the spirit and message of the gospel', the Chinese church, influenced by the English and American revivals and their overseas missionary endeavours, has historically emphasised individual experiences of rebirth and salvation, exhibited a dualistic inclination towards spirit and flesh, and embraced the notion of a complete and eschatological, yet discontinuous, salvation offered by God to the world (Latourette 2009:102–130; 209–227). From the vantage point

of the prevailing ecological crisis, these three perspectives do not seamlessly align with the construction and maturation of eco-theology. Their concept of salvation confines God's grace solely to human communities, neglecting the operation and transformation of God's grace within the natural realm (Jenkins 2008:227–243). However, after the emergence of Western eco-theology, theologians have critically reevaluated and rejuvenated traditional soteriology, giving rise to diverse ecotheological interpretations of salvation that not only honour tradition but also offer innovative insights (Jenkins 2008:115–207; Santmire 2014:129–184; Schel 2018:79–92). These revitalised theological frameworks should be introduced from academic circles into the ecclesiastical domain, integrated into the rituals and confessions of church communities to catalyse tangible impacts and foster environmentally sustainable practices that align with doctrinal principles. Of significance are the philosophical tenets ingrained in Chinese culture such as 'virtue of life and growth', 'unity of heaven and human beings'. These concepts have the potential to synergise with efforts to transform the human-centric tendencies prevalent within the Chinese church and expand the understanding of God's grace.

Next is the 'the tradition of the Christian people' in China. Both the official and unofficial Christian churches in China have always placed great emphasis on the Bible, spiritual practices and sanctification. Therefore, it is crucial to base eco-theological theories on biblical interpretations and actively foster ecological spirituality. This approach not only makes eco-theology more readily accepted by church communities but also allows believers to undergo a spiritual transformation in the realm of ecology, which can then manifest in their thoughts, emotions and actions. This, in turn, paves the way for a smoother transition towards greening and ecological transformation within church traditions.

Looking at the situation within the Chinese church, when considering 'the spirit and message of the gospel' alongside 'the tradition of the Christian people', the church in mainland China should actively embrace the 'translation model' and the 'anthropological model' for educating congregations on ecology. Following this, a collective ecological spiritual renewal can be achieved through the 'transcendental model', leading to participation in environmental conservation efforts via the 'praxis model'. To elaborate, theological workers within the church should first utilise the 'translation model' to incorporate the latest Western ecological theological advancements that resonate with the essence and message of the Gospel and reflect them doctrinally, thereby highlighting ecological concerns in preaching and rituals. Subsequently, they should, in line with the 'anthropological model', understand and communicate the theological traditions practiced by the congregation to effectively advocate and practice Chinese ecological theology (Huang & Hu 2019:133). Finally, building upon these foundational efforts, church theologians and pastoral staff should promote ecological spiritual practices through the 'transcendent model', fostering a renewal of ecological spirituality among the faithful, which should translate into tangible actions. At this

stage, the church should put the principles of ecological theology into action through the 'praxis model', ultimately influencing real-world environmental conservation efforts.

From the perspective of academia in China, when discussing the dimensions of local culture and social change in the construction of contextual theology, the adoption of the 'synthesis model' is seen as more fitting. This article will now explore Chinese ecological theology through the lens of the synthesis model, drawing on China's rich historical and cultural resources as well as its contemporary context. The synthesis model aims to strike a balance between 'experience of the past'-referring to scripture and tradition, and 'present experiences', encompassing the experience, culture, social location and social change (Bevans 2002:88).

In China, the academic community holds institutional advantages in integrating past and present experiences. This is evident in mainland China's scholarly theological studies, where the exploration of scripture and tradition has been seamlessly incorporated into their research focus. This is reflected in the ongoing advancements in biblical studies and the examination of the patristic tradition within the Chinese academic realm. Additionally, the Chinese academic community is well-positioned to integrate research on the enduring relationships between people and nature found in traditional culture, interpret the contextual social transformations, and thus propel the development of ecological theology.

While traditional Chinese thought may lack modern ecological ideologies, Chinese civilisation boasts a deep-rooted heritage with discussions on the interrelations among humans, nature and the heavens (Meng 2004; Zhang 2013). An Ximeng touched upon the traditional Chinese concept of unity between heaven and humanity when introducing Western eco-theology. However, given the context of China's wholesale Westernisation in the 1990s, An's stance towards Chinese culture was somewhat reserved. He noticed that the Chinese notion of unity between heaven and humanity:

Associates human affairs with celestial phenomena. At first glance, human affairs may appear to align harmoniously with celestial changes, but in reality, nature is often overlooked, diminished, and simplified to explain the fortunes and misfortunes of human affairs ... However, China's inherent concept of integration not only inhibits the robust advancement of science and technology but also fails to guide harmonious interactions between humans and nature. This mode of thinking, rooted in a closed, primitive notion of the natural economy, does not align with modern ecological principles, which have Western origins. (An 1990:51)

An (1990:26–52) primarily focused on the political aspect of 'unity between heaven and humanity', thereby disregarding the potential contributions of Chinese tradition to eco-theology. In reality, 'unity between heaven and humanity' encompasses not only political dimensions but also actionable facets and philosophical and spiritual realms (Zhao 2006). This concept can even be harmonised with modern ecological science to evolve into a contemporary Confucian ecological

philosophy promoting the flourishing and diverse prosperity of all life forms, thereby enriching the development of eco-theology (Zhang 2023:7–8).

Beyond the theoretical contributions of Chinese tradition, there are also valuable insights derived from historical encounters between China and the West. From the perspective of the synthetic model (Bevans 2002:89), the historical encounter between Christianity and Chinese culture embodies an effort by Christianity to blend elements of local Chinese Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Christian traditions while preserving its core identity. The introduction of Christianity to China traces back to the Tang Dynasty according to available historical records. Although the Christian presence faced interruptions over time, it resurged during the Yuan Dynasty, extending into the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and persisting into the Republic of China era and the contemporary period. While the concept of 'eco-theology' as understood today was not prevalent during these eras, discussions on the interplay between 'God, humanity, and nature' emerged owing to the ties between agrarian society and the natural world.

For instance, during the Tang Dynasty, Nestorianism made its way to China, blending with the indigenous Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist beliefs while upholding its core tenets. The coalescence of Western and Chinese pre-modern ideologies during this period, holds promise for contributing to the development of modern eco-theology. The classic texts of *Jingjiao*, portrayed a holistic view of nature intricately intertwined with the divine. The *Jingjiao Stele* features various natural elements, such as poetic expressions elucidating the purifying effects of baptism: 'The cleansing breeze of baptism washes away sins, leaving purity in its wake' (Weng 1995:52). Descriptions of Syria in the stele paint vivid imagery of landscapes: 'from the coral seas in the south to the treasure-laden mountains in the north and the ethereal flower forests in the west, all the way to the meandering rivers in the east' (Weng 1995:57). The *Monotheism* delves into the relationship between 'all things' and the 'One God', articulating how the world is composed of the four elements – earth, water, fire and wind – crafted by the divine power (Weng 1995:117). This divine power resides within the fundamental elements of nature, propelling their functioning and employing natural symbolism in baptism to delineate the sacred from the mundane. From a contemporary eco-theological standpoint, humans should aid in maintaining the fundamental mechanisms of nature. The impetus behind nature conservation lies in encountering the divine through nature and transcending into a realm of unity with God. It is incumbent upon Christians to engage in environmental preservation in reverence for the sanctity of their faith.

During the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, the Jesuits arrived in China, actively assimilating resources from Confucianism and engaging in a mutually enriching dialogue. Matteo Ricci observed how Ming scholars referred to heaven and earth as 'great parents', a concept he

transformed into an epithet for God (Lai 2014:101). In the context of the synthetic model (Bevans 2002:91–92), Matteo Ricci is seen as a guiding figure in Chinese contextual theology rather than a direct executor, while Yang Tingyun, as a Chinese Confucian scholar who embraced the Christian faith, is recognised as the trailblazer of contextual theology within the Chinese context. Yang Tingyun expounded on God's creative prowess, emphasising the omnipotence and intricate craftsmanship of the divine (Li 2007:220). The notion of 'great parents' was creatively reinterpreted by Confucian intellectuals who embraced Christianity, having the potential for constructing a Confucian ecological ethic that harmonises the unity of heaven and humanity with considerations of practical benevolence (Li 2007:238–240; 324–327). Moreover, Bishop Ding Guangxun introduced the concept of the Cosmic Christ, offering insights tailored to the unique Chinese context. Ding's doctrine of the Cosmic Christ is derived from the attributes of God's love, primarily addressing the circumstances of the newly established People's Republic of China in 1949. This doctrine asserts that God's saving grace extends beyond individuals to encompass the realm of politics and culture, ushering in divine grace to the newly formed China. While Bishop Ding's concept of the Cosmic Christ predominantly focuses on the political and social aspects because of the era's limitations, it does not directly touch upon ecological concerns. Nevertheless, given the current ecological challenges in China and globally, Bishop Ding's concept of the Cosmic Christ bears significant potential for the advancement of ecological theology (Lai 2017:480). Beyond China's distinctive historical tapestry, the country's indigenous cultural expressions in literature, music, art and architecture provide a trove of materials illuminating the intricate interplay between humans and nature, serving as a fertile ground for cultivating eco-theological perspectives (eds. Powers & Tsiang 2016; Wang 1995; Wu 2024; Zhou 2018).

The synthetic model acknowledges that each culture possesses its unique strengths and areas where it can benefit from learning from other cultures (Bevans 2002:91). Chinese culture is no different. While China esteems the concept of unity between heaven and humanity, there is a notable lack of discussion on how the sense of transcendent sacredness translates into concrete behavioural norms in daily life. In this respect, Chinese culture should embrace the principle of 'cultural transformation and social change' (Bevans 2002:91). Specifically, environmental conservation efforts in China should reinforce a deep respect for the sanctity of the law, drawing lessons from Western legal systems on the precise delineation of responsibilities and rights for governments, businesses and individuals, along with their effective implementation.

In summary, when considering the cultural resources in China, the potential for engaging in a dialogue between traditional Chinese beliefs and Western eco-theology through a comparative theological approach is undoubtedly significant. Viewing this synthetic approach from the perspective of mutual influence and

complementarity between Eastern and Western civilisations, it aligns well with the trajectory that ecological theology in China should take. Synthetic model is best suited for adoption by mainland Chinese humanists or religious scholars.

Moreover, the synthetic model places importance on the 'complexities of social and cultural change' (Bevans 2002:89). Therefore, in developing a synthetic approach to Chinese ecological theology, it is imperative not to disregard the discourse surrounding the relationship between humans and nature within the societal and cultural context of China. It becomes apparent that since the onset of reforms and opening in China, there has been a shift away from ideological constraints towards a longstanding emphasis on practical and scientific rationality. For instance, Yang's (1994:85) conclusion underscores that 'If faith in God can indeed serve as a deterrent to Western environmental degradation, there is little need to engage in debates regarding the existence of God – an inherently unverifiable and unprovable matter. The focus should instead be on how faith in God can inspire Westerners to respect and cherish nature, prompting a compassionate understanding of ecological theology and encouraging its exploration'. According to this passage, the author's affirmation of the practical efficacy of Western Christian ecological trends becomes apparent. This perspective is also reflected in the author's subsequent focus on Western environmental ethics rooted in the natural sciences and ecology (Yang 2017a, 2017b, 2022). Considering Holmes Rolston's environmental ethics based on natural sciences, as well as his subsequent integration of environmental ethics with theology (Rolston 1988, 1994, 1999, 2012), Rolston emerges as a valuable ally for China in shaping a localised ecological theology.

Moreover, given the prevalence of materialism in society since the initiation of reforms and opening, it is imperative to actively consider how Christian ecological theology can address the environmental damage wrought by global capitalism and contribute to the establishment of an ecological civilisation. The exploration of Paul Tillich's correlational approach to elucidate the spiritual essence underlying global capitalism – manifested as human concupiscence epitomised by consumerism – offers valuable insights (Lai 2002:37–42). Lai further posits that regardless of religious affiliation, doctrines, spiritual practices, rituals that help humanity curb and transform existential greed, thereby promoting simple living and mitigating the detrimental impact of consumerism on the planet, should all collaborate in tackling the challenges posed by the ecological crisis (Lai 2002:37–42). In his role as a scholar in Hong Kong, Lai fulfils the role of the external expert within the synthetic model (Bevans 2002:92). He illuminates the cultural constraints inherent in the Chinese context and tackles them using Tillich's theological approach. This method involves shedding light on and healing the culture through the Gospel after conducting a thorough examination of the current realities in China – a method that represents the synthetic model's approach to handling experiences from both the past and the present (Bevans 2002:93).

Thirdly, since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Marxism has been the prevailing ideology in China. This backdrop poses a challenge that the development of ecological theology in China must confront. Despite Marxism being atheistic, the profound critique of capital's limitless expansion put forth by ecological Marxism undoubtedly holds value for absorption within Chinese ecological theology. Through a Marxist lens, Zeng (2023:1–6) responds to ongoing discussions on religion and ecology, suggesting that fundamentally addressing the ecological crisis necessitates social change, international cooperation and technological advancement. The profound dialogue between Chinese ecological theology and Marxism on environmental issues is crucial within the Chinese context to collectively tackle the ecological crisis.

In summary, considering the abundant resources embedded in Chinese culture, embracing a comparative theological approach to foster dialogue between traditional Chinese practices and Western ecological theology holds tremendous promise. The synthetic model transcends mere integration of traditional and contemporary experiences; it fosters inventive dialogues and advancements (Bevans 2002:90). As the traditional Chinese concept of the relationship between 'humans and nature' remains untouched by the disenchantment of modernity, Chinese ecological theology should engage in diverse and layered dialogues, striving to craft an ecological theology embraced by both tradition and current realities. Viewing this approach through the lens of mutual enrichment and complementarity between Chinese and Western civilisations underscores its crucial role as a developmental trajectory for ecological theology in the Chinese context.

Conclusion

This article explores the reception of ecological theology in China and notes the absence of a well-defined, contextually grounded ecological theology with a distinct sense of agency in the country. Subsequently, it analyses the potential forms of ecological theology in China through the lens of four dimensions of contextual theology. It suggests that the academic and religious spheres in China should prioritise different aspects in fostering the development of contextual ecological theology, fostering partnerships with diverse stakeholders to collectively confront the challenges posed by the ecological crisis. Furthermore, when viewed from the perspective of cross-cultural exchange between Eastern and Western civilisations, the article proposes that if Chinese ecological theology should adopt 'synthetic model' to assimilate the traditional Chinese notions of 'Heaven-Nature-Human' and offer tangible responses to the contemporary contexts both within China and globally, such a form of Chinese ecological theology would undoubtedly emerge as a much-anticipated voice in the international theological community, capable of making a distinctive contribution to the broader discourse on global ecological theology.

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H.Z. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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