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How to Make Sino-Reformed Theology Possible?

Retrieving Abraham Kuyper's Proto-Reformed Contextual Theology

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Abstract

This article aims to retrieve Abraham Kuyper's theology to develop Reformed theology in mainland China. It shall argue that Kuyper's concern about the varying contexts where theology is practiced shows an underdeveloped proto-Reformed contextual theology. Nonetheless, his idea of common grace serves as a conceptual apparatus through which his proto-Reformed contextual theology can underpin the construction of Sino-Reformed theology, a Reformed theology that is organically united with the history of Christianity while taking root in Chinese culture and interacting closely with the Chinese context. Such a contextualised Reformed theology can make Reformed faith an indigenous plant in the garden of Chinese Christianity on the one hand and prove conducive to the development of an organic Reformed community and theology on the other.

Keywords

Abraham Kuyper – Chinese theology – contextual theology – Reformed theology

1 Introduction

In his groundbreaking work *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephen Bevans begins with an inspiring statement: “There is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only *contextual* theology.... The contextualization of theology – the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context – is really a

theological imperative” (Bevans 2002:1).¹ Over the last three decades, much scholarly attention has been drawn to the exploration of theology’s relation to particular contexts, including, among others, digital contexts (e.g., Schmidt 2020), the context of globalisation (e.g., Marks 2008; Greenman and Green 2012), and East Asian contexts (e.g., Kim 2003).

In concert with the thriving of contextual theology in the Western world, Reformed theology has been flourishing in mainland China since the 1980s. Alexander Chow demonstrates in his recent paper that the rise of Calvinism and Reformed theology in mainland China was synchronous with the rapid change of Chinese socio-political contexts over the last four decades (2021: 561–574). This synchrony is not indicative of a *contextualised* Reformed theology in China. In fact, Reformed faith in China goes down the rabbit hole in that it has yet to figure out the approach to contextualising Reformed theology in relation to Chinese culture and society.

This paper seeks to cope with the un-contextualised status of Reformed faith in mainland China through exploration of Abraham Kuyper’s (1837–1920) theological system. Retrieving Kuyper’s thought for the inquiry into the status quo and future of Reformed faith in China can be justified by two facts. Firstly, Kuyper was a founding father of Dutch neo-Calvinism, a nineteenth-century theological movement that was intended to make Calvinism influential in the national life of the Netherlands. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Kuyper was one of the leading Reformed theologians in the modern age. As such, his Reformed system is an important legacy for contemporary Reformed communities. Secondly, Kuyper is widely known in the circle of Chinese Christianity. The Chinese translation of his famous *Lectures on Calvinism* was published in 2006, having a significant bearing on Christian intellectuals. The neo-Calvinist ideas such as sphere sovereignty, common grace, and general revelation are not alien to Chinese Christian communities. Hence, Kuyper is an ideal interlocutor in our exploration of contextualising Reformed theology in mainland China.²

It is worth pausing here to clarify that Kuyper does not use the term “contextual theology” in his work. The idea of contextual theology was not extensively and systematically discussed until the late 1960s, for example, by Shoki Coe

1 The first edition of this work was published in 1992.

2 In Kuyper’s writings, the terms ‘Calvinism’ refers to a theological life system and worldview in most cases, whereas ‘Reformed’ means a theological system. Yet this slight distinction cannot obliterate their conceptual affinity. For Kuyper, the Reformed theological system is essential to a life system and worldview (A helpful analysis can be seen Bavinck 1894:1–24). Kuyper’s uses of ‘Calvinism’ and ‘Reformed’ are different from the meanings of these two words in the Chinese context, where they are considered synonymous in many cases. This paper identifies Calvinism as a branch of Reformed theology, but will use them interchangeably in places in order to accommodate Kuyper’s points of view to Reformed theology in China.

(1968; see also *idem*, 2012:21–38). In this light, exploring Kuyper's view of contextual theology sounds anachronistic. Nevertheless, Kuyper reiterates once and again his concern with the contexts where Christian faith was propagated. From this vantage point, it can be argued that Kuyper has made a preliminary attempt – in comparison with Shoki Coe, Stephen Bevans, and other contemporary theologians – to articulate a *contextual theology* in his own context of the nineteenth-century Netherlands. In this sense, he presents us with a proto-Reformed contextual theology.

I shall argue that, based on his account of the development of Christian theology and the theology of common grace, Kuyper constructs a proto-Reformed contextual theology which seeks to configure the relationship between the Christian faith and differing contexts so as to deepen and extend Christianity's interaction with a particular culture. It should be conceded that this proto-Reformed contextual theology remains to be refined and developed. Nonetheless, it provides Chinese Reformed communities in mainland China with a paradigm for constructing Sino-Reformed theology, a Reformed theology that is organically united with the history of Christianity while taking root in Chinese culture and interacting closely with the Chinese context by virtue of common grace. Such a contextualised Reformed theology can make Reformed faith an indigenous plant in the garden of Chinese Christianity on the one hand and prove conducive to the development of an organic Reformed community and theology on the other.

This paper proceeds to sketch Kuyper's historical account of Christian theology in the *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (*Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*). It will be demonstrated that Kuyper's consciousness of theology's contextuality rests in his retrospect of the historical development of Christian theology. Following this, I will dwell on Kuyper's view of confessing Reformed faith in various contexts, bringing to the foreground his idea of common grace that lies at the foundation of his contextual understanding of Reformed theology. Finally, I will explore how Kuyper's proto-Reformed contextual theology may prove conducive to the construction of Sino-Reformed theology.

2 The History of Christian Theology

On the surface, it seems preposterous to argue that Kuyper was well conscious of theology's contextuality, and even more so to demonstrate that he articulated a *proto-Reformed contextual* theology. For it is widely known that Kuyper maintained that European civilisation is superior to others (e.g., 2015:1.12.10, 1.41.1, 1.61, 1.62). In this light, some scholars concede that Kuyper did not break

away from the racist ideas of his day (see Mouw 2011:80–85). One may easily draw the corollary that Kuyper's theological system cannot produce a contextual theology insofar as it devalues non-European culture and contexts.

James Eglinton's recent study, however, shows that Kuyper can be read against Kuyper himself in terms of racism. Through analysis of Kuyper's *Varia Americana*, Eglinton uncovers Kuyper's ambivalence on racial issues. On the one hand, Kuyper intentionally criticised the racism that prevailed in the American society of his day; on the other hand, he unintentionally endorsed racist narratives (Eglinton 2017:65–80; Kuyper 1898b). His ambivalence proves that his theological system does leave much room for the positive evaluation of non-European contexts and culture.

Kuyper pays attention to the importance of contexts (both the European and the non-European) for the development of Christian theology in the *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*. He delineates the development of Christian theology over nineteen centuries and, by doing so, brings to explicit articulation how his awareness of variegated contexts is of great importance to his theological system (Kuyper 1898a).³ He divides the history of theology into six periods: naivety, the internal conflict, prematurely claimed triumph, development of multiformity, the apparent defeat, resurrection.

In the period of naivety, Kuyper argues, apostolic fathers were unconscious of “theology as an organic science” and focused attention on “exhortation” (Kuyper 1898a:642). Indeed, there were some intellectual activities in Alexandria. Yet, this intellectual inquiry was largely swayed by “pagan speculation” (Kuyper 1898a:643). That said, the first period was packed with preliminary theological intellectual activities, such that all departments of theology can be traced back to this period (Kuyper 1898a:644–645). Hence, for Kuyper, although theology in the first period did not develop in the sense of modern *Wissenschaft*, the seed of scientific theology was sowed in the first three centuries. When it came to the fourth century, the starting point of the period of the internal conflict, Kuyper turns our attention to how the radical change of the political context, caused by Constantine's conversion to Christianity, remodelled Christianity's intellectual activities. The idiosyncrasy of the second period can be summarised as follows:

As an intellectual power, Paganism no longer stood. All intellectual power was now withdrawn within the walls of the Christian Church; consequently, the antitheses which were to impel theology to action could

3 This English edition was composed of the translations of the introductory section of the first volume and the whole second volume of the Dutch edition (Kuyper 1908–1909). However, the entire third volume was left untranslated.

not but have their rise in the heart of that Church itself. Hence it became a conflict within its own bosom.

KUYPER 1898a:648

Kuyper makes it clear that these antitheses were epitomised by the conflict between the Christian and the unregenerate life-principle. Genuine theology was tied up with the new life rooted in divine grace (Kuyper 1898a:648–649). As such, the shift of the political context from the anti-Christian to the pro-Christian in the second period dramatically changed the communal context where Christian theology was practiced.

The third period refers to the Middle Ages, in which Christianity foregrounded the practical aspect of Christianity and sought to civilise all Western nations through monasticism, ecclesiastical laws, and “edifying literature of a pious trend, mystical flavor and sound content” (Kuyper 1898a:653). Kuyper suggests that Christianity’s overriding influence on civil life and society prevented theology from building its connection to the progress in non-theological areas (Kuyper 1898a:653–654).⁴ However, he observes that due to its contact with Islam, eleventh-century Europe re-embraced classical studies, which paved the way for the emergence of scholasticism and universities (Kuyper 1898a:654–655). In distinction to the second period, which was characterised by the political change internal to the Western context, the third period was partly yet particularly typified by how the Western intellectual context was transmuted by the external factor. Viewed in this light, it can be argued that underlying the transition from the second to the third period is the addition of new contextual elements into the Western world.

Kuyper designates the Reformation era as the fourth period, in which multi-form ecclesial confessions were composed. These multiple confessions rest with “the difference of spiritual disposition and spiritual sphere” (Kuyper 1898a:663). On this front, he underlines human limitations, arguing that theology in this period was preoccupied with “concrete forms” and ran the risk of “losing sight of the catholicity of the Church as an organism” (Kuyper 1898a:665).⁵ The phrase “concrete forms” is vague, and Kuyper does not detail it. Nevertheless,

4 Kuyper’s judgement on Christianity in the Middle Ages is a common sense of his day. Yet, contemporary scholars have cogently demonstrated that Medieval Christianity had a great impact on non-theological areas. For example, Lynn White maintains that Christian beliefs gave birth to the change of medieval cultural climates, which was laid at the foundation of technological advances in the Middle Ages (1972:171–202).

5 Kuyper illustrates the meaning of the church as an organism elsewhere: “an image that requires organic life, a figure that binds the parts together by means of a power operating invisibly, one that refers to a natural growth occurring not through something added but through a force that comes to outward expression from the inside” (2016:50).

by associating this phrase with ecclesial life and “life-tendency,” Kuyper implicitly points us to the particularities of the context where Christian communities live. Each concrete form represented a pattern of the life of the faith community and described a context in which the church existed at the time.

The fifth period refers to the timespan extending from the beginning of the Enlightenment to the end of the eighteenth century. Due to the conflict between rationalism and supernaturalism during this period, “theology lost in less than half a century almost all the authority it had exerted in the circles of science and public opinion” (Kuyper 1898a:671). As a result, the methodology of theological studies mutated into one that became merely attentive to historical and literary inquiry. At the same time, the practical life of the church was apparently on the decline (Kuyper 1898a:671). In speaking of this period, Kuyper reinforces the intertwining of theology and the context where Christian communities reside. By doing so, he illustrates, on the one hand, that the nature and feature of theology are embodied in the context of the church, and, on the other hand, that the life of the church mirrors the essence of its theology.

The nineteenth century was the period of resurrection. Kuyper asserts that the revitalisation of theology was owed to “many mystical influences” or to “the mystical-pietistical revival.” Yet, this theological resuscitation was preoccupied with the training of ministers and missionaries and fell short of theological consciousness (Kuyper 1898a:672–673). Theology gradually became subject to philosophy, all the more so under the influence of Kant and Schleiermacher. Despite such a negative assessment, Kuyper recognises that these two prominent thinkers made a great contribution to the formation and development of the scientific and organic nature of theology, that is, theology as a unified intellectual system and university discipline. That said, under the sway of these two thinkers, theology eventually morphed into the science of religion and, by virtue of *Vermittlungstheologie*, increasingly discarded its theological character (Kuyper 1898a:674–677). In view of these theological tendencies in this period, Kuyper suggests that confessional theology, be it Lutheran, Reformed, or Roman Catholic, is called upon to defend Christian religion and theology (Kuyper 1898a:677–678).

It is in his elaboration on the period of resurrection that Kuyper’s intensive attention to the contextuality of theology comes to the foreground. He argues that confessional theology has a twofold mission:

first, a universal one, viz. so to investigate the fundamental questions which are common to all the churches, that the radical difference between the consciousness of regenerate and unregenerate humanity shall ever be

more fully exposed to light; and, secondly, to raise the special form of its own confessional consciousness to the level of the consciousness-form of our age.

KUYPER 1898a:679

The first mission is concerned with the position of theology in the context of *Wissenschaft*. It is widely known that Kuyper categorises science into two groups, which originate, respectively, from the consciousness of the regenerate and the unregenerate (Kuyper 1898a:152–178). To his mind, the two sorts of consciousness lead to the formation of two entirely different social, political, and cultural contexts in which theology is practiced (see Bolt 2017:132–136; Graham 2015:130–142). The second mission is closely tied to the transformation of the contexts of theology over the centuries. To this extent, Kuyper's emphasis falls on the milieu of his day for the development of confessional theology. He seeks to contextualise confessional theology in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In his narrative of the six periods of Christian theology, Kuyper leverages the close connection between the development of theology and the emergence of new social, cultural, intellectual, and political contexts. To be sure, the terms “context” and “contextuality” are absent in his *Encyclopedia*. Yet, the analysis thus far suffices to prove that Kuyper's emphasis on the contextual features of theology is central to his theological system. A question may arise: why does Kuyper pay close heed to the shifts of contexts while sketching the history of theology? An answer to this question can be found in the third volume of his *Encyclopedia*.

In demonstrating Church History as a discipline, Kuyper accentuates the developmental character of history:

As water flows, streams, congeals, is crystalised, melts and evaporates in mist soon, this water underwent all kinds of transformation according to fixed laws, but therefore this water has no history. Repetition of equal moments in a variety of relations can never yield history. History goes through a process and moves to its *telos* without ever repeating itself aimlessly.

KUYPER 1908–1909:3,264; all translations are my own

As per Kuyper, this unrepeatability underlines two essential features of history: the ideological and the genetic. History is ideological insofar as it is concerned with the idea. As such, history can be viewed as the process of the idea. History is genetic precisely because there is “the causal bond which in the process of

this idea connects the single, consecutive moments to one another” (Kuyper 1908–1909:3.264). This ideological-genetic feature stresses both the unity and diversity of history. Since history is concerned with idea, it is united as one.⁶ Inasmuch as history does not consist of repeated moments, the genetically connected moments showcase the diversity of history.

The unrepeatable, ideological, and genetic features of history can also be applied to the history of Christian theology. That is, Christian theology did not repeat itself over the centuries but was instead conducted particularly in different yet consecutive moments, which together made up the unity of theology’s history. Although Kuyper does not elucidate the meaning of “moments,” it can nevertheless be understood when we associate it with his account of the six periods of theology’s history. These single, consecutive moments imply the shifts of contexts.

Kuyper’s account of the six periods of theology’s history, along with his notion of history, shows theology’s connection to a specific moment and context. He even envisions that confessional theology – for him, it is Reformed theology – shall be contextualised in his age. Without doubt, Kuyper’s point of view compellingly explains why Reformed theology in mainland China must be connected to Western Reformed theology. The Reformed theology in mainland China is another single “moment” in the history of Christian theology, succeeding and extending the sixth period (in Kuyper’s language). As such, Sino-Reformed theology belongs to, so to speak, the seventh period of the history of Christian theology. To be sure, in light of Kuyper’s concerns about the contextuality of theology in the six periods, Sino-Reformed theology should be contextualised in Chinese societies and have close ties to Chinese culture. Kuyper’s insistence on the instantiation of Reformed faith in contexts and his theology of common grace consolidate the development of a Sino-Reformed theology in this direction. Before unfolding this point, we turn to Kuyper’s accent on the contextuality of Reformed theology in his other writings.

3 Reformed Faith in Contexts

Kuyper’s emphasis on the contextuality of Reformed theology is not confined to the *Encyclopedia*. As early as 1874, he went some way towards addressing the

⁶ Kuyper issues a caveat that this ideological-genetic feature of history cannot be understood in a Hegelian sense. For it is not the absolute spirit but rather God who actualises his counsel in the development of history. (Kuyper 1908–1909:3.264–265).

contextualisation of Calvinism, which anticipated his view of the period of confessional theology.

Calvinism is not a rigid, unalterable power that had reached its final conclusions, its definitive shape, already in Calvin's time. On the contrary, it is a principle [*beginself*] that only gradually reveals its power, that has a unique insight for every age, that assumes a form suitable for every country. Precisely in this restless metamorphosis [*gedaantewisseling*] its development continues.

KUYPER 1998:293; 1874:22

This passage presents to us Kuyper's understanding of two essential features of contextual Reformed theology – tempo-spatiality and organicity. Coupled with relevant sentiments and formulations in his other writings, these two features reinforce Kuyper's anticipation of contextualised confession theology in the sixth period and are supportive of the development of Sino-Reformed theology.

The first idiosyncrasy of contextual Reformed theology is tempo-spatiality. Kuyper brings up this essential feature in his elaboration on the historical development of Calvinism in America, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, in which he endeavours to demonstrate how the Reformation and Calvinism paved the way for constitutional liberty in Europe (Kuyper 1998:292–299). Calvinism is, for Kuyper, never a movement that remained unchanged from the sixteenth century onwards.⁷ Rather, it has strenuously sought to take root in a particular context and age for a particular nation.

Kuyper cogently illustrates the tempo-spatial character of Reformed theology in *Our Worship (Onze Eeredienst)* (1911).⁸ A case in point is his investigation into the administering of sacraments in Eastern countries. While speaking of baptising Eastern people who are newly converted from Islam and other religions,

7 In this respect, Kuyper severely criticises Reformed communities in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Scotland due to their failure to promote the development of Reformed theology: "After the earliest flowering of Reformed life, not one original talent blossomed in the doctrinal field. The stream of Reformed thinking that had once flowed so freshly across the plains of religious thought dried up. What had begun earlier with breadth and vastness withered into narrow-minded, truly byzantine investigation, the kind of inspection that lacks even the resilience to go back to the root of the Reformed idea" (Kuyper 2015:xxxv).

8 The English translation of *Onze Eeredienst* left nearly the one-third content of the Dutch edition untranslated (Kuyper 2009). Of these untranslated paragraphs, some are relevant to Kuyper's understanding of contextualising the Reformed liturgy in Eastern contexts.

Kuyper suggests that the Heidelberg Catechism – which was used to teach the laity before their baptism in his day – is not suitable for teaching the Christian faith in Eastern contexts precisely because what the Catechism teaches is by and large out of accord with the social, cultural, religious contexts of Eastern countries. The Catechism is mainly concerned with the sixteenth-century Reformation and was composed for Western Christians (Kuyper 1911:419–420). Following this, he asserts that Western churches would fail to properly understand their own calling if they strove to impose Western ecclesial confessions on churches in Eastern countries (Kuyper 1911:420).

The point Kuyper seeks to make is about how Western missionaries and Eastern Christian communities should configure the liturgy and theology with a view to Eastern contexts. Needless to say, his sentiment is a caveat to Chinese Reformed churches in the twenty-first century. As illustrated at the beginning, Chinese Reformed churches are inclined to adopt Western Reformed confessions mechanically. I am less convinced that the Westminster Confession, the Canons of Dordt, the Heidelberg Catechism, and other classical Reformed confessions can immediately provide approaches to dealing with the issues confronting the Reformed churches in mainland China. Indeed, these Reformed confessions and catechisms do afford Chinese churches some theological tools that can be used to address these issues. We shall return to this point later.

Kuyper turns our attention to organicity as the second essential feature of contextual Reformed theology. In the passage quoted at the beginning of this section, he makes it clear that Calvinism will continue to grow and develop through its powerful and living principle (*beginsel*). It is worth noting that the Dutch term *beginsel* is crucial to Kuyper and other Dutch neo-Calvinists alike. As early as 1896, W. H. Gispen (26 June 1896) suggested that the method of Reformed principles (*Gereformeerde-beginselen-methode*) is an essential element of neo-Calvinism. Kuyper portrays this developmental feature of Reformed *beginsel* in an organic way in his Stone Lectures:

As truly as every plant has a root, so truly does a principle hide under every manifestation of life. These principles are interconnected and have their common root in a fundamental principle; and from the latter is developed logically and systematically the whole complex of ruling ideas and conceptions that go to make up our life and world-view. With such a coherent world and life-view, firmly resting on its principle and self-consistent in its splendid structure, Modernism now confronts Christianity.

KUYPER 1899:260–261

Although Kuyper is spelling out the relationship between Reformed principles and worldview, his sentiment foregrounds the organic character of Reformed theology. Two points are of note here. Firstly, like every organic plant that has its own root in the soil of a particular area, Reformed theology in each context has its own principle, which means that we should pay due attention to Reformed *theologies*. Each Reformed theology in a particular context develops its own trunk and branches and eventually grows into a splendid living system, producing a worldview and view of life for people in this context. Without doubt, the plurality of Reformed theologies reinforces Kuyper's emphasis on the tempo-spatiality of Reformed theology. It also reminds the Chinese Reformed communities to develop the organic character of Sino-Reformed theology. That is, Chinese urban Reformed churches and grass-roots churches should be united organically and seek cooperation to boost the development of Reformed theology in China. This point will be unfolded in the next section.

Secondly, the oneness of the fundamental Reformed principle means that underlying Reformed *theologies* is a Reformed *theology* that underpins the contextualisation of Reformed theology. Reformed *theologies* are interconnected and integrated as a holistic Reformed *theology*. Seen from this perspective, Sino-Reformed theology is organically connected to other Reformed *theologies* and combined with them as a whole. Reformed theology is characterised by diversity-in-unity and can be contextualised in any context. For Kuyper, this diversity-in-unity of Reformed theology is predicated upon common grace, and God's common grace lies at the foundation of the contextualisation of Reformed theology. Although Kuyper does not clearly account for contextualising Reformed theology in light of common grace, this line of thought is apparent in a series of his articles on common grace.

In the first volume of *Common Grace*, Kuyper (2015:377, 529, 593) lays out a rationale for understanding common grace: particular grace has its foundation in common grace, and common grace is indispensable for the external manifestations of particular grace. To flesh out this rationale, we need to draw on Kuyper's notion of the twofold operation of common grace. He maintains that common grace operates in both the internal and external dimensions of human life. In the internal dimension, common grace restrains the human propensity for sin and helps humans to develop civic righteousness, loyalty, natural love, and all other human virtues. In the external dimension, common grace underpins the advancement of human arts, culture, science, and all wondrous progress in human life (Kuyper 2015:540; also see Kuyper 1899:164). This twofold operation of common grace clarifies how common grace serves as the *foundation* of particular grace. That is, common grace preserves creation,

which is the arena of God's particular grace. As such, Kuypers asserts, "particular grace is connected with common grace and makes use of it. Without common grace, the church of Christ would not find a place to stand among our human race" (Kuypers 2015:301; also see 2019:130, 134; 2020:141).

Kuypers's delineation of the relationship between common and particular grace turns our attention to the contextuality of the foundation of particular grace. He asserts that "without common grace, such a *living environment* in which the church of Christ could make its appearance simply could not have existed" (Kuypers 2019:108–109). Common grace operates in all nations and has given birth to diverse cultures, civilisations, legal systems, philosophies of human virtues, and so forth, around the world. When speaking of common grace as the foundation of particular grace, we should reckon with the connection between the church of Christ and a particular context or environment that is a part of creation. Accordingly, having its foundation in common grace, particular grace should be contextualised.

Considering the close connection between common and particular grace in tandem with the contextuality of common grace, it can be argued that Reformed theology is intrinsically contextual and characterised by diversity-in-unity. From this vantage point, it can be seen why Kuypers is convinced that the period of confessional theology will extend the sixth period of the history of Christian theology. God's common grace is operating to preserve creation and, that being so, the churches continue to be connected to and have their external manifestations in their own contexts.

In light of the universality and persistence of common grace, we can draw a corollary that Kuypers anticipates the globality of theology. Andrew Walls observes that due to the particularly close connection between Christianity and Western culture, it is generally believed that global Christianity only just arose in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Christian faith and theology were never confined to Western countries and have been global since the days of the early church (Walls 2012:19–34). Kuypers's idea of common grace reveals that this globality places the spotlight on the contextual nature of theology because of God's preservation of creation. To be sure, Sino-Reformed theology is a branch of global Christian theology. Chinese Reformed churches are situated in a specific context – which is preserved by common grace – and consequently have to do with a particular culture, civilisation, society, politics.

It has been argued thus far that Kuypers develops a proto-Reformed contextual theology. Taken together, his historiography of Christian theology and emphasis on the continuing operation of common grace give shape to the fabric of a Reformed approach to contextualising the Christian faith. This begs a question: to what extent can Kuypers's proto-Reformed contextual theology advance Sino-Reformed theology in the twenty-first century?

4 From Proto-Reformed Contextual to Sino-Reformed Theology

Whilst considering Kuyper's proto-Reformed contextual theology in relation to Sino-Reformed theology, we should have a bird's-eye view of the development of Reformed theology in mainland China over the past four decades, the years when Christian Reformed communities in mainland China had a difficult labour in producing Sino-Reformed theology.

In 1807, the first Protestant missionary Robert Morrison (1782–1834) arrived in Canton. In support of his missionary work, Morrison decided to compose some Christian texts. A prominent one was a catechism, which was drafted on the basis of a classical Reformed catechism – Westminster Shorter Catechism (1646–1647) – for the purpose of teaching Christian truth in a comprehensive manner (Daily 2013:149). Despite the fact that Reformed faith has been introduced into the circle of Chinese Christianity in the early nineteenth century, Reformed theology did not develop and flourish until the 1980s. The reform and opening-up policy, which was initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, caused mainland China to become a part of globalisation. On the heels of this policy came the outreach of Chinese churches to churches and theology in Western countries. Owing to this new connection between Chinese churches and global churches, Jonathan Chao (Zhao Tian'en 赵天恩) and Stephen Tong (Tang Chongrong 唐崇荣), two overseas Chinese Reformed theologians, took the lead in developing Reformed theology in mainland China (see Chow 2019:442–457).

Against this backdrop, Reformed theology in mainland China has developed its own idiosyncrasies, which throw up many debates over its status quo and future. In what follows, I will focus on two primary idiosyncrasies or issues that undermine the possibility of Sino-Reformed theology. The first is the identity of Reformed theology as an exotic plant in mainland China. The second is the tension between urban Reformed churches and traditional Chinese churches (especially grass-roots churches). It is on these fronts that Kuyper's proto-Reformed contextual theology provides Chinese Reformed communities with theological tools by which to develop Sino-Reformed theology.

5 An Exotic Plant in the Garden of Chinese Christianity

The rise of Reformed theology in China is largely different from other movements of Christian theology in the twentieth century, which carried distinct Chinese socio-political and cultural imprints. From the 1920s to the 1940s, for example, China's national crisis caught much attention. Wu Leichuan (吴雷川, 1870–1944) and Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao 赵紫宸, 1888–1979) sought to marry

the Christian faith with Confucianism to construct the national identity of Chinese Christians during the years of the national crisis (see Chu 1995; Chow 2013:65–87; Xu 2017b:162–180). When we come across names such as Wang Mingdao (王明道, 1900–1991) and Watchman Nee (倪柝声, 1903–1972), the idea of indigenous Chinese churches will come to mind (see Xi 2010:155–203). Even the “three-self” policy enacted by the Chinese government reflects the political ideal of Chinese socialism imposed on churches.

In contradistinction to these theological movements in mainland China of the twentieth century, the thriving of Reformed theology hardly gives the impression that it is a theological system *in Chinese society* and *for Chinese churches*. I have argued elsewhere that this disengagement from the Chinese context is mirrored in the reception of classical Reformed confessions in Chinese Reformed churches, who are keen on applying traditional Reformed confessions mechanically and literally in their own contexts and seek to transform themselves accordingly (Xu 2021:156). Underlying these churches’ rigid commitment to Reformed confessions is their reluctance to allow for the roles that Chinese culture and their own immediate contexts can play in the articulation of Sino-Reformed theology.

Kuyper’s proto-Reformed contextual theology issues some caveats to Chinese Reformed communities. The first and foremost one is that it is imperative for Chinese Reformed communities to take root in Chinese society and build their relevance to Chinese culture. As per Kuyper, the living force of Reformed theology is embodied in its strong adaptability to variegated cultural soils under the auspices of God’s common grace. To paraphrase his claim, this living force indicates that “Christianity has been an intercultural reality” and leverages “its most creative phrases” by drawing on its surrounding cultural resources to articulate Christian doctrines in various contexts (Sanneh 2012:41). As a response to common grace, Chinese Reformed communities should figure out how they can capitalise on Chinese culture to translate Reformed faith *for Chinese churches*.

A few Chinese theologians who endorse Reformed theology have been aware of the imperative to respond to common grace in this cultural manner. For instance, Mingyi Sun (孙明义) asserts that:

A fundamental feature of the Christian faith is its incarnationality. God’s Word or the truth of Holy Scripture surely and inevitably enters a culture and expresses itself in a mode in every sphere of this culture so as to become God’s common grace for human society. This is the meaning of the cultural mandate that the Church should carry out.

MINGYI 2008:31

I would like to suggest that Sino-Reformed theology should actualise this incarnationality by composing a Sino-Reformed confession for Chinese churches (Xu 2021:161–162). This confession is not the product of a mechanical or literal understanding of historic Western Reformed confessions. Quite to the contrary, Chinese Reformed communities should bear in mind Kuyper's view of the metamorphosis of Reformed principles in varying contexts. Specifically, Reformed principles embedded within Western Reformed confessions – not Western Reformed confessions themselves – should be foregrounded as the lens through which to construct the relevance of Reformed theology to Chinese culture and society. A case in point is the underexplored relationship between Christianity and modern New Confucianism. Mou Zongsan (牟宗三 1909–1995), a prominent New Confucian scholar, has asserted that a true Chinese person should not follow or accept Christian faith (Mou 2007:135). Yet, Mou's antagonistic attitude toward Christianity does not invalidate the fact that his philosophy provides conceptual tools to express Reformed theology – say, Reformed theology of the *imago Dei* – in Chinese culture (Xu 2017a 2017:298–324). Needless to say, a Sino-Reformed confession composed through engagement with Chinese philosophy definitely takes root in Chinese society. By doing so, Sino-Reformed theology acknowledges God's common grace, which operates *for* Chinese culture and serves as the foundation for the external manifestation of particular grace *in* the Chinese context.

Kuyper's second caveat to Chinese Reformed communities is that Sino-Reformed theology should be organic. That is, Sino-Reformed theology is a Reformed theology among Reformed *theologies* and, at the same time, part of Reformed *theology* as the globally organic whole. This organicity points us to the ostensible tension between Sino-Reformed theology *per se* as an organism and Sino-Reformed theology as an organic part of Reformed *theology*. In other words, Sino-Reformed theology that is rooted in the Chinese context and in relevance to Chinese culture seems to be in conflict with its close proximity to Reformed theologies in other contexts. Indeed, Kuyper does not deal with such a conflict. Hence, the idea of organicity laid out in his proto-Reformed contextual theology remains to be developed.

Some contemporary theologians have taken this conflict to the discussion table. According to Stevan Bevans, for example, a major issue of contextual theology is that it “can be so rooted in its own context that it can no longer communicate or talk with the theology of other peoples or other churches” (2012:15). As such, he suggests that the way forward for contextual theology is to strengthen the cooperation between theologies in different contexts, which not only deepens a contextual understanding of Christian theology but also contributes to the global Church (2012:16). Bevans' observation on this major

issue of contextual theology has less to do with the status quo of Reformed theology in China. As has been demonstrated, a hindrance to the development of Sino-Reformed theology is none other than its essential irrelevance to the Chinese context. That said, Bevans' suggestion regarding the dialogues between contextual *theologies* is a reminder that needs be kept in mind for the future of Sino-Reformed theology.

In distinction to Bevans, Andrew Walls articulates the principles of indigenising and pilgrim. This twofold principle complements Kuyper's view of the organicity of contextual theology. The indigenising principle means that inasmuch as "God accepts us as we are, on the ground of Christ's work alone," a human person in Christ needs "to live as a Christian and yet as a member of one's own society, to make the Church ... *A Place to Feel at Home*" (Walls 1996:7; emphasis original). Notwithstanding the fact that "as we are" should be maintained in contextual theology, we should strike a balance between the indigenising and the pilgrim principle. The latter principle stresses that God in Christ accepts people as they are "in order to transform them into what He wants them to be" (Walls 1996:8). The pilgrim principle stresses the necessity of connecting Christians with all things and all other peoples belonging to God's kingdom outside of their own culture and communities and, eventually, of linking up Christians with "the people of God in all generations" (Walls 1996:9). With this twofold principle, Walls draws a blueprint of the future of Christian theology: "since none of us can read the Scriptures without cultural blinkers of some sort, the great advantage, the crowing excitement which our own era of Church history has over all others, is the possibility that we may be able to read them together" (Walls 1996:15).

Walls' twofold principle shows that contextualising theology is a journey of life in a particular context and a pilgrimage with other peoples of God outside of that context. This imagery sits well with Kuyper's emphasis on the living force of Reformed theology as an organism. Sino-Reformed theology should be developed as an indigenous plant in the garden of Chinese Christianity and, at the same time, share the same living force with other Reformed *theologies* in the theological pilgrimage.

This organic account of Walls' twofold principle entails two implications for Chinese Reformed communities. First, as has been demonstrated above, Sino-Reformed theology should manifest its living force for Chinese churches and in relation to the Chinese context. Second, Sino-Reformed theology should be connected to broader Reformed traditions. Chinese Reformed communities' mechanic reception of Western Reformed confessions more often than not creates a misleading impression that Reformed theology in China has a profound knowledge of Reformed traditions. Upon closer examination, however,

one cannot fail to be astonished by the fact that Chinese Reformed communities are only preoccupied with a few historic Reformed confessions – such as the Westminster Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Belgic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism – and are oblivious to the richness and abundance of Reformed traditions. James Dennison's *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (2008–2014) includes 127 historic Reformed confessions and catechisms composed between 1523 and 1693. The indigenous Sino-Reformed theology should be linked up with those unknown Reformed *theologies* so that it can be fully integrated into *the* organism of Reformed theology.

6 Seeking An Organic Unity and Cooperation

The dramatic development of Reformed theology in mainland China has drawn much scholarly attention. It is interesting to note that the pertinent literature presents us a worrisome aspect of Reformed faith in mainland China. Many scholars pay close heed to the impact that Reformed theology and Calvinism have had on Chinese public intellectuals and urban churches (城市教会). Fredrik Fällman (2012), for example, explores the impact of Calvinism on Chinese elites and intellectuals and on their interaction with Chinese culture. In like manner, Alexander Chow (2018, 2014) delves extensively into how and to what extent Calvinism and Reformed theology have been formative for the Chinese public theology constructed by Christian intellectuals as a response to Chinese political and societal issues. Chloë Starr (2016) expands on how Wang Yi (王怡) – a famous pastor and Christian public intellectual who strictly follows Reformed theology – and other Reformed ministers composed 95 theses (mimicking Martin Luther's act) to deal with church-state relations in mainland China and investigates what effect these theses have had on Chinese house churches.

In distinction to the above three scholars, Kang Jie (2019) examines the rise of Calvinism in relation to the rapid urbanisation in mainland China. In her fieldwork in North China, Kang looks closely at a grass-roots church that is neither led by public intellectuals nor by educated church leaders. She makes the following observation:

the major factor in the spread of Calvinist theology is the grass-roots Christian network in mainland China, and that this supersedes the influence of overseas Chinese or politically high-profile public intellectuals. It is precisely because of the low profile resulting from their discreetly dispersed yet expanding network gives them that Christian house churches do not

normally attract the attention of media or government and so can grow quietly and quickly.

KANG 2019:3

Although this claim is made in reference to a church in North China, Kang's corollary fits in well with actual situations of Reformed churches in many urbanising areas. A typical example is that of the Reformed churches in Wenzhou, a city that has been called "China's Jerusalem" by the BBC (and others) and is well known for its large Christian population (Gracie 4 May 2014). Jonathan Chao's visit to Wenzhou in the 1990s significantly promoted the development of Reformed theology there. The widely circulated free tapes of Stephen Tong's lectures and preaching tremendously accelerated the growth of Reformed faith in Wenzhou. For example, the church denomination to which I belong was once Wesleyan Arminian; yet, a large number of ministers have now espoused Reformed theology. The rise of Reformed faith in Wenzhou is characterised by the fact that it was deeply rooted in and is still associated with grass-roots churches. Indeed, this grass-roots idiosyncrasy has somewhat changed because an increasing number of intellectuals are now joining churches. However, Reformed churches in Wenzhou have not yet completely departed from their grass-roots origins insofar as many ministers were born in the 1960s and 1970s and not well educated due to the Cultural Revolution. The expansion of Reformed churches in Wenzhou is more or less similar to what Kang observes in North China.

The two groups of scholars mentioned above present us the status quo of Reformed theology and Calvinism in mainland China. That is, Reformed communities and theologies in mainland China can generally be divided into two camps: the urban Reformed and the grass-roots Reformed. Although they both strongly endorse Western Reformed confessions, it is not difficult to perceive the distinction between these two communities. The grass-roots Reformed are low-profile and focus much attention on soteriology, whereas the urban Reformed are high-profile and concerned with political, legal, societal issues in mainland China.⁹ This apparent difference between the two Reformed camps makes their cooperation a pretty rare bird. In most cases, they exist independently.

9 This contrast should be understood in a broader context of the relationship between urban house churches and traditional house churches in mainland China. Sun YI (孙毅) offers a brief theological reflection on how new urban house churches should build their relationship with the traditional ones (2022:37–48).

Kuyper's proto-Reformed contextual theology has much to say about such mutual indifference between the two Chinese Reformed camps. As mentioned above, for Kuyper, Calvinism "is a principle [*beginssel*] that only gradually reveals its power, that has a unique insight for every age, that assumes a form suitable for every country" (1998:293). The terms "principle," "form," and "country" are worth noting. Recalling Kuyper's emphasis on the organic unity of Reformed theology, these grammatically singular terms indicate that Calvinism and Reformed theology, in a particular context and in relation to a particular culture, should grow as a unity that reflects the living force of the Reformed principle. That is to say, the future of Sino-Reformed theology rests partly yet significantly in how these two Reformed camps can be reconciled and work together to make Reformed faith indigenised in mainland China.

An attempt can be made to ameliorate the status quo of Chinese Reformed communities. That is, the urban and grass-roots Reformed can cooperate to work out a Sino-Reformed confession to satisfy their demands. This cooperation would be a turning point in the history of Sino-Reformed theology. As demonstrated earlier, Kuyper objects to using the Heidelberg Catechism in Eastern countries and suggests instead that churches in Eastern countries should compose a confession apposite to their own social and cultural contexts. Reading this claim in tandem with his view of the organicity of Reformed contextual theology, we can infer that the organic unity of a contextualised Reformed theology can be attained by producing a Reformed confession *for* churches in a particular nation. The two Chinese Reformed camps need to reflect on how Chinese Reformed communities should receive classical Reformed confessions with an eye to their own societal, political, and cultural concerns. A contextually theological mindset should critically assess these historic confessions and explore how the spirit embedded in these confessions can function well in relation to a particular culture. In this way, the two Chinese Reformed camps can take Chinese culture as a whole and collaborate to respond to the operation of God's common grace in both urban and rural areas.

This collaboration between the urban and the grass-roots Reformed communities opens up an opportunity to explore the contribution which Sino-Reformed theology can make to global Reformed *theology*. Specifically, this collaborative action integrates the two camps as an organic unity and a living system *for* churches in the Chinese context. By producing a Sino-Reformed confession, these two Reformed camps enrich other Reformed *theologies* and amplify the organism of Reformed *theology*. Kuyper's view of the organic character of Reformed theology continues to remind the two Chinese Reformed camps that, rather than unilaterally receiving Western Reformed legacies, Sino-Reformed

theology should express its living character by grafting its contextual and cultural particularities onto the trunk of Reformed *theology*.

7 Conclusion

Living in a Eurocentric era, Kuyper developed a proto-Reformed contextual theology beyond his own Western contexts. Grounded in Western Reformed legacies, particularly Calvinism, he envisaged the seventh period in the history of Christianity and anticipated confessional Reformed *theologies* in various contexts and different countries. In addition, he demonstrates two significant hallmarks of Reformed theology (tempo-spatiality and organicity), pointing us to how contextual theology showcases the harmony of God's common and particular grace. In this sense, every Reformed community is responsible for keeping a balance between Reformed *theology* and Reformed *theologies* insofar as in common grace – which underpins a particular culture and operates in each social context – God has laid a foundation for particular grace. As such, contextual theology is an intellectual and spiritual endeavour made by Christian communities in various contexts to respond both to common and particular grace.

Kuyper's proto-Reformed contextual theology is a strong reminder to Chinese Reformed communities. Westernisation is characteristic of the rapid expansion of Reformed theology and Calvinism in mainland China. Chinese Reformed communities rely heavily upon Western Reformed legacies, such that particularities of Sino-Reformed theology are either overshadowed or inhibited; after all, Reformed theology is still an exotic plant in the garden of Chinese Christianity. Kuyper's theological system informs Chinese Reformed communities that, as a living organism, Sino-Reformed theology must move from the simplex reception of Western Reformed legacies towards making contributions to global Reformed *theology*. In a nutshell, the future of Sino-Reformed theology lies in seeking its place among Reformed *theologies* and bringing Chinese culture as fruits borne by common grace back to Reformed *theology*.

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