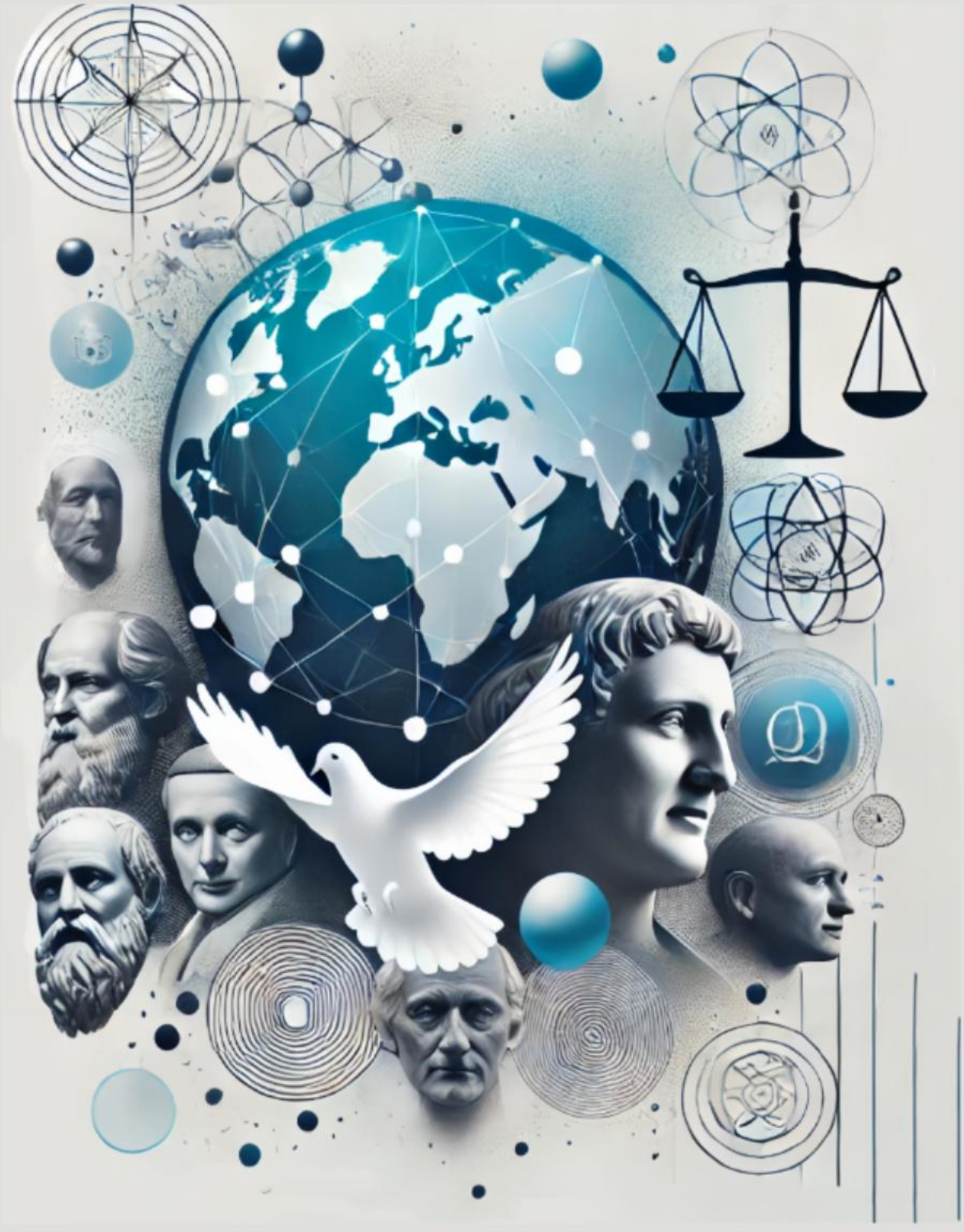
CSCHOLAR Publishing Inc.

Volume 1 Number 3 2025

Studies on Religion and Philosophy



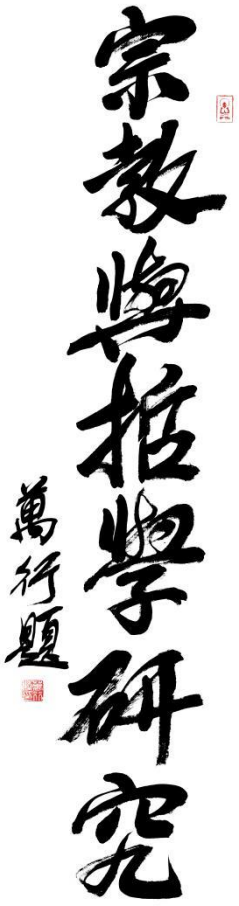
https://srp.cscholar.com ISSN: 3067-0853

Studies on Religion and Philosophy

ISSN: 3067-0853

Volume 1, Issue 3, 2025

Quarterly (Issue No. 3)



Publishing Unit: ConnectSix Scholar Publishing INC

Publisher's website: http://www.cscholar.com/

Publisher's address:

6547 N Academy Blvd #2265

Colorado Springs CO 80918

US

Website of the journal *Studies on Religion and Philosophy*:

https://srp.cscholar.com/

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Studies on Religion and Philosophy, 2025, 1(3), 1-13
https://doi.org/10.71204/b9cj9459

The Ontological Compatibility of Methodological Naturalism with a Benevolent, Infinite God

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Received: 13 August 2025/ Accepted: 9 September 2025/ Published online: 14 September 2025

Abstract

This paper works to explore the ontological compatibility of methodological naturalism with the concept of a benevolent, infinite God. Methodological naturalism, which is intended to operate independently of metaphysical claims, offers a neutral stance on the existence of deities; maintaining the empirical integrity of the scientific method. In examining four leading models of divinity, this paper assesses their potential to align with methodological naturalism while preserving divine attributes of infinity and benevolence. The paper then argues that, of the four, panentheism provides the most suitable framework for the integration of such a deity into a methodologically naturalistic framing. The combined model maintains the empirical constraints of methodological naturalism while allowing for a divine presence that embodies ultimate goodness in an infinite nature.

Keywords: Ontology; Divinity; Methodological Naturalism; Classical Theism; Pantheism; Emergentism; Panentheism; Science and Religion

1. Introduction

Methodological naturalism (hereafter, "MN") cannot and should not appeal to divinity; that is its defining clause. As such, MN takes an agnostic stance on the ontology of potential deities. Some of its adherents, like Elliott Sober, note that methodologically naturalistic science "does not in any way detract from the plausibility of supernaturalist theism," making clear deities are possible, in-theory (Sober, 2011). The purpose of this paper, then, is to review four leading ontological models for divinity and discuss their compatibility with MN. This, in and of itself, is a rather unbecoming task—as MN should remain agnostic to any and all ontologies (even atheistic ones) in the supposition that science should not consider God. As such, I intend to fold in a further criterion: that divinity should be both benevolent and infinite.

To be clear, the present paper does not attempt to justify benevolence as a central attribute across all religious traditions. Instead, I am using this specific definition of benevolence as a criterion for its exploration—as, indeed, we are doing philosophy here. I have argued in a past work, focused on the God of the Christian tradition more broadly, that if there were to be a God, that entity should be bound by a single characteristic, in that they should be "Not simply a God who loves, but a God who is love itself" (Ruud, 2021). While it may appear as though I have used the word "love" as a banal remark elsewhere, it is intended to be a binding term—in that all love is God and all God is love, "nothing more…nothing less" (Ruud, 2021). We might say this is the framing of a benevolent deity who exists in some infinite sense. Though rooted in broader traditions, and providing something which may resonate with certain others, the definition of a benevolent, infinite God is a foundational premise for this specific paper, not a universal one; and not one specifically targeted, in this context, at the God of any particular historical or denominational view of the Christian God.

With the potential to allow scientifically-minded individuals not to simply embrace the realities of scientific study, but incorporate them into a reconstructed religious framework, MN can be utilized as a tool to harmonize theism with science (Inglehart, 2020). That said, not enough attention has been given to the type of deity (ontologically speaking) that is attempting to be conjoined to the MN worldview. As many Western religious advocates think of their God as being both infinite in some fashion and benevolently inclined, as mentioned above, most monotheistic frameworks necessarily limit God to one category or another—oft promoting the portrait of a retributive being where God must possess and promote both good and evil. Being that this is a deity some might find repulsive, the task of this paper is to point out the flaws in such ontological models and then lay the groundwork for a more promising alternative where a deity is able to retain both their infinite and benevolent traits and exploring the compatibility of this type of deity while maintaining the integrity of MN.

2. An Overview of Terms

This paper's discussion will be best served by first defining what we mean when speaking to various ontological models of divinity. Benedikt Göcke helpfully outlines four as follows:

1) *Classical Theism* - God and the remainder of existence are distinct from one another.
2) *Pantheism* - God and all of existence are entirely one and the same.
3) *Theistic Emergentism* - God is wholly situated within the scope of existence.
4) *Panentheism* - All of existence is situated within God (2017).

Our leading discussion centers itself on the supposed infinite and benevolent natures of God—as in how does God's infinance and benevolence interact within the above models? It is worth noting here that it is not my attempt to argue for my own theological presumptions about how God is (or indeed, how God is not) in the following discussion. In fact, if there is a God, which, frankly, one cannot fully know at this juncture, that God might be far different than any of the possible God-models articulated here (or by those not listed by Göcke, including forms of polytheism, deism, et cetera). What I intend to point out is how these ontological models of

divinity interact with God if that God must be both infinite and benevolent, and, too, interact within a MN framing.

It will also be of use to define both infinite and benevolence for the remaining discussion. *Infinite* in this paper, is something that by definition, cannot be wholly quantified. While I acknowledge mathematical infinities and theological or philosophical infinities are not perfect mirrors of one another, thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas articulated an infinite deity as being something in which its own qualities are not limited by the nature of being in his *Summa Theologica* 17. So I will often use the language of mathematics to speak of the divine. Also of importance for this paper, *Benevolence* speaks to all that is good in its highest form—love, compassion, grace, mercy, kindness, forgiveness, et cetera—coupled with no hint of evil, oppression, indifference, et cetera. Of course, these natures are, admittedly, human conceptualizations and thereby tainted (at least when compared to a God of supposed infinite and benevolent natures). So, put simply, when talking about benevolence in this paper, I will be using it in a way in which it represents goodness in its highest and most complete forms.

3. The History of MN and its Definition

With the rise of creationism as a "scientific" alternative to the classical method in the 1960s, Paul de Vries of Wheaton College in the United States is said to have derived a new way to think about science and faith—this he deemed "methodological naturalism" (De Vries, 1986). (It is worth noting that scholars such as Perry & Ritchie (2018), perhaps rather correctly, dispute de Vries as MN's founding thinker.) De Vries had been using that particular nomenclature for some time before putting it to print, as the framework was intended to provide an alternative to the duopoly of scientific creationism and evolutionistic scientism (Poe & Mytyk, 2007). His work was, however, more a review of a competing view (that of Nicholas Wolterstorff) than the makings of his own philosophical argument. Beyond de Vries, MN then gained significant traction in the late 1980s as philosopher Michael Ruse used it in the American judicial system to criticize the efforts of many who argued for intelligent design in their attempt to portray creationism and evolution as competitors (Kojonen, 2017). Ruse, much like de Vires before, made clear that the disjointedness of the two camps engaged in the intelligent design-evolutionary theory debate was not the only way for the fields to interact—and, indeed, that they could work in tandem (Papineau, 2001). Others, such as John Polkinghorne, a physicist turned priest, are, too, critical of the intelligent design movement, yet in a slightly different way. Polkinghorne is said to prefer working from the ground up; building a model of divinity from what can be known in the natural realm and not the other way around, as so many in the aforementioned movement endorse (Polkinghorne, 1996). Polkinghorne thinks of the disciplines of science and religion as cousins, working toward the same goals. While these few voices do not represent, in total, the breadth of thought in regard to MN, they paint an accurate portrait of the movement's past.

Looking at MN's varied history then begs the question, where is it now? *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* spells MN out as something which sees science and philosophy "engaged in essentially the same enterprise, pursuing similar ends and using similar methods"

(Papineau, 2001, sec. 2.1). This form of MN is not necessarily tied to religious doctrines (or a certain lack thereof when thinking along atheistic lines) and is, frankly, not the kind of MN which this paper will discuss. Instead, I will look to an opponent of religiously-inclined MN, Andrew Torrance, who defines it as being a "method that assumes that the reality of the universe, as it can be accessed by empirical inquiry, is to be explained solely with recourse to natural phenomena" (2017, p. 691). Meaning that, essentially, MN does and should not make claims about the supernatural (or lack thereof) and that its main purpose is to deter individuals from appealing to the supernatural when working out a scientific explanation—it is this definition from which this paper will draw.

4. Limitations of MN

Like any framework, MN is not without constraints. One of its primary limitations comes in the form of its exclusivity. MN commits to seeking only naturalistic explanations for observed phenomena, leaving no room for metaphysical or supernatural explanations. (Some, like Ruse, debate this, stating that God and MN can indeed coexist; how that is possible, ontologically, is left ambiguous, however [2001, p. 365].) While this commitment is essential for maintaining the empirical integrity of science, it limits the scope of inquiry by precluding exploration of phenomena that may have metaphysical aspects. For instance, questions related to consciousness, ultimate purpose, or the nature of moral values are said to often transcend the boundaries of naturalistic explanation. MN may inadvertently restrict the pursuit of knowledge in these domains, as it is ill-suited to addressing questions that inherently involve non-naturalistic elements. Consequently, the limitations of MN become evident when tackling questions that pertain to the deeper dimensions of human existence.

Another limitation of MN is its tendency to omit alternative, non-naturalistic perspectives—or simply adopt them as natural. Critics argue that MN can be perceived as dogmatic, biased against supernatural or metaphysical explanations, and, as a result, it might inadvertently limit our understanding of reality (Larmer, 2019, p. 7). Science's commitment to MN might lead to the neglect of valuable insights offered by alternative worldviews, such as those posited by philosophical perspectives or theological doctrines. Consequently, a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of reality might be hindered.

Naturally, MN's strict commitment to naturalism can also pose challenges in engaging with philosophy and theology. It may appear as a conflicting ideology, particularly in discussions related to the nature of reality and ultimate questions. Philosophical and theological perspectives often encompass metaphysical elements that lie outside the purview of MN (Larmer, 2019, p. 9). Thus, the tension between MN and these philosophical and theological worldviews can limit fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue. In part, the above limitations are why I am writing this paper, to show that there is room for possible matches in which ontological models for divinity stand to hold a God who is both infinite and wholly benevolent within the framework laid out by MN. We will now spend a short while on each of the four models, described briefly in the section above, in an attempt to find one that fits with MN.

5. Classical Theism

We will first look to classical theism, where, ontologically, God and all else that exists are completely separate from one another. Here, there is no overlap between God and "the universe." Proverbially, if what is known to exist is a bowl of fruit, encompassing a mango, several apples, tangerines, an orange, and perhaps a small bunch of bananas, God is not the fruit, or the bowl in which it sits, God is, in this analogy, the knife sitting on the countertop beside the fruit bowl. There is a distinction between the fruit and the knife; they are completely separate from one another—serving different roles, shaped differently, and made of different materials. Many, if not most, classical theists go beyond an ontologically separate deity and travel into the realm of "perfection," where Thomas Williams in his introduction to the model says, "The unqualifiedly perfect being is atemporal and immaterial—free from all limitations of time and place. It acts but is not acted upon, and so it is said to be impossible. It is perfect in knowledge, perfect in power, and perfect in goodness" (Williams, 2013, p. 95). Many monotheistic religions, such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, all, by and large, subscribe to this type of entity (Williams, 2013, p. 96).

In classical theism, however, God cannot be truly infinite, at least within the parameters of what has been created—as God is distinct from and outside of what God has caused to exist. There are two spatial localities in this model, and while God may infinitely inhabit one (i.e. heaven), God is not allowed to incarnate the other (the created universe). While God may not be truly infinite given this particular model, God can remain benevolent as, since God is not a part of the created cosmos, whatever evils do exist in that space, are entirely separate from God's deity—war, suffering, oppression are all separated from God as God is separated from creation. That said, classical theists often point to their God as having perfect (i.e. infinite) freedom (Mawson, 2016, p. 143). Which, if that were true, would actually take away any possibility of infinite benevolence, since a wholly free God could then choose to create a wholly benevolent world—which, at least in human conceptualization, does not exist.

All said, does this version of divinity have the potential to exist in a MN framework? Well, that depends on one's own metaphysical presuppositions. If such a God existed, yet chose to refrain from interacting with the reality of which humanity is a part, that God would not be in conflict with MN since it would be unobservable by science (and, thereby, unable to be verified scientifically). The religious person who possesses a particular faith in such a God, however, could, too, view their own theism as valid so long as they refrained from concocting naturalistic theories which involved the deity (i.e. where one's God impacted the universe which we inhabit, by helping someone find their missing keys or purse, for instance). This isn't to say problems don't arise, however, as the classical God's aseity—complete ontological separateness from the rest of reality—creates issues with doctrines such as *imago Dei* and others, since the classical God cannot be dependent on anything other than Godself; and in creating and/or interacting with things apart from God, God, necessarily, loses such self-sufficiency (Webster, 2007, p. 148). So, classical theism does not wholly work on this front, yet its lack of fit is not so much dependent on the parameters of MN so much as its internal incongruencies when thinking about the external parameters of benevolence and infinance.

6. Pantheism

For this paper's second model we will look to pantheism, where God and all else that exists are completely conjoined as one. In this model, God is identical to "the universe." To continue with the above analogy, if what is known to exist is a bowl of fruit, God is not simply a mango or a tangerine, God is, instead, both the mango and the tangerine, as well as each and every banana, orange, and apple in the bowl. God is each piece of fruit in its entirety; and while there may appear to be clear distinctions between the various fruits, they are all wholly God. This is a deity who is ontologically synonymous with the remainder of reality and, as such, impossible to distinguish from it (Leslie, 2007, p. 4).

Here, God exists as everything (both in what we might call heaven and the remaining universe). There is no dualistic distinction between these two localities as God is situated as the uniting infinite—*God is all*. "God's thought did not make the world," writes Jennifer Michael Hecht of perhaps the preeminent expander of pantheism, Baruch Spinoza's view, "God *is* his thought, and the God-thought *is* the world" (Hecht, 2003). But, while the infinite and grounding nature of the divine is blatantly present in pantheism, there exists a problem with God's benevolence. For, if God exists as all that is, God would necessarily inhibit both the good and the bad in any given scenario—war, suffering, and oppression are all God equally so with peace, happiness, and equity. So, as with traditional theism, pantheism does not hold up to both ends of the litmus test.

Since MN is committed to explaining the world in the terms of natural causes, properties, and activities, and the pantheistic God is entirely situated as existence's causes, properties, and activities, it follows that such a God would be entirely compatible with MN. Pantheism, like classical theism, has its own problems, however—chiefly, that if everything is God nothing is really "God," at least in the sense that such a God is of higher morality, power, or ethic. (Responses to similar objections are plentiful, with Spinoza (1632-1677 CE) standing out as a thinker whose method for diffraction came by simply doing away with the need for a wholly pure being (Nadler, 2020, sec. 2.1) Ontologically, of course, this has no real effect as MN can, itself, make no claim regarding the viability of a given deity so long as the rules of the natural world are not broken—which, since the natural world is the deity, they are not. Subsequently, as the pantheistic God can be observed by science (though perhaps not verified as properly divine), even with its flaws, it could be seen as a better fit regarding this paper's aim to retain infinite benevolence than the aforementioned classical theism.

7. Theistic Emergentism

Next comes theistic emergentism, where God is situated (and was, at one point, formed) wholly within all else that exists. In this model, God is a proper part of "the universe." Returning to the fruit bowl, here God is a banana and a banana only. The mango, tangerines, apples, and orange all exist in the fruit bowl with the God-banana, but God is not those other fruits or the bowl in which it sits, neither is God the entire bunch of bananas from which it came, but one banana alone. There is a distinction between the piece of God-fruit and the rest of existence; so that while they exist among each other, they are still completely separate from one another (Bennett-Hunter, 2015,

p. 331). Here, God was grown from the preexistent universe. (It is of note that scholars such as Philip Clayton reject the idea of emergent theism as an ontological option for the divine wholly based on the fact that "a God who would be doing things within the cosmos subsequent to the big bang would be encroaching on the territory for which the sciences are responsible" [2006, p. 185].)

Of course, this could mean that, as with traditional theism, since God is separated from the rest of existence, although this time exists within it, God could certainly retain God's benevolent nature. Now, that may prove improbable—as no thing the human has experienced has proved to be entirely good (house cats, while soft and cuddly, have painful claws; autos, though they indeed are handy in an effort to get from home to work, get into accidents; and so on)—it is not thoroughly impossible that there would be an entirely benevolent God situated within the cosmos. The emergent God would exist within the scientific confines of reality as it is known, though perhaps such a God remains properly undiscovered by the scientific community—not because the deity exists as ontologically undiscoverable, such as with the God of classical theism, or as ontologically indistinguishable, such as the God of pantheism, but because the "semidivine" simply exists within the physical confines of the same universe that limits the knowledge and scope of the human species (Franklin, 2019, pp. 2-3).

With this in mind, the emergentist's framework does not, strictly speaking, conflict with MN—though, it might simply be labeled plausible (and, based on its inability to yet be tested scientifically, nothing more). Emergentism varies from pantheism, however, as it defends the idea that while God is a part of the created cosmos, God is in fact, not at all infinite—and is instead determined as being a properly finite segment of reality.

8. Panentheism

We will conclude this survey of ontological models by looking to panentheism, where God and all else that exists are completely intertwined with one another. Here, "the universe" is a proper part of God. Turning one final time to our bowl of fruit, now the mango, apples, tangerines, orange, and bunch of bananas are all a part of God, yet, God this time transcends those fruits and is, too, a part of the bowl in which they sit, and even the knife used to slice them into edible pieces. Were the knife to be used and an apple split in half, one would notice its seeds and fleshy core, these seeds and the core are not themselves God (petering on emergentism) though they are a part of the apple, but, just like everything else, *a part* of God. To borrow the words of Göcke, the bowl of fruit is "essentially divine but . . . not exhaustive of the divine being" (2017, p. 1).

John W. Cooper speaks of panentheism as being something the likes of Schleiermacher, Bergson, Ruether and McFague would articulate as God being "the Life Force, the dynamic Spirit that generates life, intelligent order, and oneness in the universe" (Cooper, 2013, p. 19). God here links all that is, God is *a part* of everything—that is God is in all of existence, but not *entirely* so—this semantic distinction is what separates panentheism from pantheism. And it is here where God's infiniance in this model may come into question, as God is in everything and, thereby, everything is a part of God, yet God is not everything nor is everything God. As confusing and counterintuitive as this may sound, it also demonstrates that God is in fact not all of everything

which may then appear as though God is also not infinite. Now, based on one's conceptualization of an infinite being, this may or may not be true—if one's idea of infinity must include *everything*, say every possible digit of every number in existence, God would not be infinite in the panentheistic model. That said, one's idea of infinity may come from a vastly different place—say, not in every number, but in certain parts of every number. For example, looking at a number line, you will notice whole numbers include both odd and even digits as their decimals. Here we could say that every even decimal of every whole number is God, and every odd decimal of every whole number is not God. God is still a part of every whole number (and exists within each whole number an infinite amount of times), but God is not that number (or the infinite line of whole numbers) *in its entirety*. If one's conceptualization of God comes from the former mode, God would not be properly infinite. Yet, if one's portrait comes from the latter mode, God retains God's infinite nature—where God can be infinite as a part of the entire whole and yet not the whole entirely.

This then brings us to God's benevolent nature. How might divine goodness fit within the aforementioned mode by which God's infinite nature is expressed? Within an infinite universe which houses both good and bad there can still exist an infinite God who is wholly good—just as within an infinite amount of whole numbers, there are, too, an infinite number of odd decimals as there are even within the whole numbers. Proverbially, an infinite God (our even decimals) co-exists with, but is not a part of, the evils of the world (the odd decimals). While this is by no means a perfect analogy, it does demonstrate how a benevolent entity might retain its infinite nature amidst the apparent chaos of the cosmos.

9. Infinite and Benevolent Interactions with the Models

When it comes to considerations about the infinite, there are two cases to think through: either "the universe" is finite or it is infinite. If "the universe" is finite, then, on the models of pantheism and emergentism, God is finite. If "the universe" is infinite, then, on the models of pantheism and panentheism, God is infinite. The classical God, which is in no way a part of "the universe" must, in all cases, be finite. While the emergent God could be infinite within an infinite universe, but would necessarily be finite within a finite one.

When it comes to considerations about value, there are two cases to consider here, as well: either "the universe" is "good" or it is "not good." This, of course, relies heavily on the assessments about the universe's breadth above. For, if "the universe" is "good," then, on pantheism and emergentism, God is also necessarily "good." If "the universe" is "not good," then, on pantheism, God is "not good." For panentheism, God could be "good" inside "the universe" and "not good" outside of it (or vice versa). And, necessarily, for the classical God, such a deity could be either "good" or "not good" since it exists outside of "the universe."

10. MN's Interaction with the Models

After reviewing the above models, we come to a rather awkward fork in the road, for while panentheism may indeed retain God's infinance and benevolence, all of the aforementioned ontological models might indeed work within the scientific framework of MN; yet since MN is keen to make no metaphysical claims or assumptions, and as it is itself a wholly scientific enterprise, it would behoove me to allow MN to remain MN and not fit it to my metaphysical presuppositions or lack thereof into its mold. Ontological models of divinity, which themselves are found to be separate from what can be presently known through the practice of good science, are a part of a completely different truth-seeking mechanism. This is not to say that MN and theology, say, cannot work in tandem, but it is the very nature of MN to refrain from picketing itself alongside any version of theistic or atheistic thought—and perhaps it is healthiest in that position.

While all four models discussed do indeed provide a possible match (at least when speaking strictly ontologically) for a deity, of any kind, to be paired with MN—primarily because of MN's entirely agnostic ontological stance—all models, too, find themselves with problems outside of this paper's scope which, in turn, have the potential to render them rather less than ideal once a deity's infinite and benevolent natures are layered in. However, were we to pick a model with the most promise, it would not seem a stretch to contend that panentheism best fits the bill. This because panentheism is the only model mentioned which is itself ontologically ambiguous—while classical theism and theistic emergentism house God, in God's entirety, either within or without the rest of "the universe," and where pantheism concludes God is the entirety of said "universe," panentheism provides space for ontological uncertainty, making it the most suitable model for reconciling an infinite, benevolent God with MN. This persuasion, in my estimation, is what makes panentheism a choice partner when looking to the aforementioned parameters of this paper.

There is yet another benefit of panentheism which ties into the idea of an infinite, benevolent God. It is that this model of deity allows for the personal God most classical theists adhere to, amidst the evils presented, to be retained. Scholars such as John Bishop and Ken Perszyk recognize the link a panentheistic deity can make in how the existence of evil can be consistent with a personal "omniGod," as they call it (2016, p. 108). This is of course necessary for the retention of a benevolent deity—a value articulated by the philosopher Thomas Talbott when he says that "Anything less than a perfectly loving God . . . would be far worse than no God at all" (2014, p. 7). For how could God be good yet sit apart, at a distance, from afar, looking at the not-so-good things happening to God's creation? This conceptualization aids in the retention of God's suffering as *a part* of God's creation. In Christendom, for example, the assumption that Jesus was God incarnate furthers this line of reason; where a part of God, who was indeed divine, suffered alongside the rest of God's divinity (humanity). Other New Testament metaphors, such as the body of Christ and all things being made new in Christ, point to the plausibility of this ontological model within that particular tradition (e.g. Colossians 1:15-17; 1 Corinthians 12:27).

With this lens in mind, and assuming for a moment that God is both infinite and benevolent, it would follow that God must necessarily be a part of everything which embodies benevolence. Meaning that panentheism, then, provides the best model that allows infinite benevolence to have

care for finite entities, since those finite entities are, themselves, a part of the infinite benevolence—without also necessarily housing anything less-than-benevolent. This is similarly articulated by Bishop and Perszyk when speaking to panentheism as a model of divinity, "that God is the supremely good end of the Universe and that this is what ultimately explains the existence of all that is" (2016, p. 106). Where God is the "ultimate," the "grounding," the infinite sum of all that is and all that will be—and it is because of this that God would necessarily show unique interest and have intimate care for every individual (as modern Christendom oft projects). For since God is, in this model, quite literally, *everything* which is good and nothing that is bad, God must *necessarily* care for every finite thing, even though God is, in Godself, infinite.

Finally, panentheism finds itself in a unique place when compared to the ontology of the three aforementioned models. For, as MN is careful to make no real distinction regarding ontological divinity or lack thereof, panentheism is itself careful to do the same (even though, comedically, it is an ontological model). The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines it as "the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in [God]" (Cross & Livingstone, 2005, pp. 1221-1222). This, like pantheism, is difficult to refute scientifically, as such divine embodiment, even if just partially so, is still lacking in the classical ontological qualities necessary to make such observation (Brierley, 2004, p. 11). This unique difference, however—panentheism's rather ambiguous ontological stance juxtaposed to pantheism's universal persuasion—perhaps makes it a better partner for MN in that MN itself takes an ambiguous (or, agnostic) metaphysical stance.

11. Potential Objections

This conjoining of MN and panentheism with an infinite deity of highest-order goodness should not go unchallenged. Here, I lay out what I see as being three primary holes in this proposed marriage.

1) Now, it could easily be argued that, if God is fully infinite, that would also mean that God could not be benevolent—for as to an infinite entity, something finite would be perceived as not existing. (Just as a finite entity cannot fully comprehend an infinite entity, it would follow that an infinite entity (because of its ever-growing expanse of infinity) would not be able to truly comprehend a finite entity [see Smith, 2016, pp. 95-121].) Which, if that were the case, would result in an infinite entity losing its ability to truly care for (show benevolence towards) the finite. That said, I have already asserted that, of the four models Göcke articulates, panentheism is the only way to have an infinite God care for any finite thing. I have said this because while to an infinite entity, finite things do not exist nor compute, in panentheism, all that is finite makes up the infinite. This would necessitate constant care of the infinite for the finite since the finite is itself a part of the infinite. This would then mean that an infinite, benevolent God must *necessarily* have care for all that is. This, as it follows, grounds Göcke's second criterion in that a God must be worthy of worship.

2) Another objection might be found in how I have defined infinity. Some may want to define God's infinance as being an infinite maximality—essentially asserting that God is infinitely good

in that God is the most good (no other good goes beyond God's), or that God is more good than any other thing. Of course, in classical theism, this is often how God is perceived as being; allowing for God to possess both good and evil so long as God retains more good than any other thing. But is an infinite maximality truly infinite? I would argue not, for while on a day in which I am well hydrated, I may be made up of something like 60 percent water, I am not all water. Even though I may be made of more water than the rest of the materials which make me the human that I am, I am not water infinitely so (even within the parameters of my being). It follows that just because God is perceived as being mostly good, certainly more good than any other entity, that does not make God good in an infinite fashion.

3) Keeping that in mind, an interesting contradiction to MN's current framing can be found in the work of Loren Haarsma of Calvin University in the United States. Haarsma attempts to use his theism as a foundation for scientific frameworks, such as MN (Haarsma, 2003). He says that "Methodological Naturalism … is a tool for conducting limited investigations and for discovering limited truths" (2003, p. 55). He frames MN in its current form as "misleading" as it teaches that "God is absent from ordinary natural events" (2003, p. 57). Of course, the problem with Haarsma's desire to use his ontologically religious belief as a foundation on which to build MN is that, in doing so, he has neglected MN's primary clause—that it will utilize no assumption, credence, or belief unable to be justified by science. In reversing the order of operations, as it were, Haarsma has not successfully, as intended, paired MN with theism and instead created a framework entirely independent of it. Even if the ontological outline he attempts to construct were true, his claims regarding it would presently be falsified because their "truth" is not yet endorsed by the scientific method. One could easily argue that using MN, while still remaining theistic, is rather counterintuitive. But, as this paper has intended to demonstrate, it could prove to be of value to various religious adherents, given a proper ontological model (Perry & Ritchie, 2018). It should not go unsaid, however, that MN is, indeed, in conflict with many religious frameworks—primarily because MN often takes a neutral stance on ontology; while models of divinity, in contrast, regularly take rather distinct stances on the matter.

12. Concluding Thoughts

This paper has sought to establish a connection between the idea of an infinite and benevolent deity with the ideological parameters of MN, a method that looks to empirical inquiry alone in an attempt to describe "the universe." As I have worked to show, because of the posture MN takes toward divinity, it cannot itself speak to the reality of deity and must remain agnostic. After reviewing a slate of leading candidates, panentheism was presented as the most viable ontological framework for harmonizing the concept of an inherently good and infinite God with the principles of MN. As such, it is, at present, best equipped to harmonize with the demands of scientific methodology than any of its competitors.

Again, my intention has not been for this paper to argue for MN to make claims about faith, but rather to serve as a neutral framing that allows individuals to hold a faith commitment without contradicting the scientific process. And, based on the parameters of inference and benevolence, it

seems panentheism can best be conjoined with MN in such a way. Here, more practically, I have aimed to provide a reconstructed religious framework where scientifically-minded people can seamlessly incorporate scientific study into their beliefs, were those beliefs to be limited to an infinitely benevolent deity—showing that, at least in theory, a possible match can indeed exist. Though agnostic in its final posture, the proposal here of conjoining MN with panentheism provides an answer to the unbecoming task of reconciling yet another dimension of apparent discrepancy between science and religion.

Author Contributions:

The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Studies on Religion and Philosophy, 2025, 1(3), 14-23
https://doi.org/10.71204/yz9bzq35

Beyond the Scar: Selfishness as a Metaphysical Impediment to African Progress

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Received: 3 October 2025/ Accepted: 12 October 2025/ Published online: 6 November 2025

Abstract

Even though external forces like colonialism and slavery can be considered legitimate reasons for Africa's underdevelopment, pervasive selfishness, rather than external historical factors, stands as a formidable impediment to development efforts across African societies. This study, adopting a tripartite methodological procedure, which includes forty-five years of critical participant observation, a systematic empirical examination of the East African media, and theoretical synthesis, has analysed how selfishness (self-interest) is a metaphysical and structural impediment to African progress. African society, at all levels—from individual and household to national—is characterized by a pervasive "me-first" mentality, manifesting as a sina uchungu (I feel no pain) mentality, an inability to act through metaphysical evasiveness, which we refer to as the God-Satan mentality, the political economy of spiritual exploitation, lack of planning, irresponsibility, unaccountability, laziness, and a stifling of critical inquiry. The study reveals how this complex operates within the tension between traditional communitarian philosophies like Ubuntu and contemporary realities of cultural transformation, where historical legacies of extractive institutions intersect with modern religious interpretations to create environments where self-preservation behaviours become rationalized. By demonstrating how these internally rooted cultural and ethical dispositions actively undermine development efforts, the paper calls for a reconceptualization of African advancement that must address not only political-economic structures but also engage in deliberate projects of cultural, ethical, and spiritual renewal to foster the collective responsibility and human agency essential for sustainable progress.

Keywords: Selfishness; African Societies; Accountability; Fatalism; Social Capital; Collective Action

1. Introduction

The dialogue on African underdevelopment has long been dominated by the legacies of external forces: the historical injustices of slavery and the structural violence of colonialism (Rodney, 1972; Niyonzima, 2024). While acknowledging the undeniable and devastating impact of these factors, this paper posits that an exclusive focus on external causation risks overlooking a more insidious, internally rooted challenge. I argue that a pervasive culture of self-interest has much to do on African underdevelopment. Selfishness (Self-Interest) is defined as the acts prioritization of one's own personal needs, desires, and welfare, often at the cost of, or without due regard for, the well-being and interests of others or the collective gain **(**Bussen at al., 2024). African societies culture is characterized by the consistent prioritization of personal, familial, or ethnic gain over the communal good constitutes a profound metaphysical and structural impediment to progress in many African societies (Ayittey, 1998; Moyini, 2007).

This culture of selfishness (self-interest) transcends mere individual character flaws. It is a "lameness" that manifests at every level, from household dynamics to national governance, undermining cooperation, stifling innovation, and perpetuating a cycle of underachievement. The prevailing mentality, as observed in my own context, often appears overwhelmingly cantered on immediate personal benefit, systematically obstructing collective decision-making and sustainable progress (Zhang, 2023).

While self-interest is a component of universal human nature (Arevuo, 2023; Hobbes, 1651), its specific manifestation within the observed social contexts appears uniquely detrimental to communal well-being. This pushes beyond psychological egoism towards what can be termed detrimental hyper-individualism, where the pursuit of self-interest actively harms the collective effort in a society (Bussen et al., 2024; Tannock, 2021). This stands in stark contrast to the altruism and communal ethos espoused by traditional African philosophies like Ubuntu ("I am because we are") (Mbiti, 1969; Tutu, 1999). This paper will therefore explore the tension between these professed communal values and the observed reality, suggesting that contemporary African societies may be experiencing a complex cultural transformation. Influenced by globalization and urbanization (Wiredu, 1996; Gyekye, 1997), traditional communal bonds may be weakening without a corresponding adoption of robust ethics of civic responsibility, creating a vacuum where unchecked self-interest flourishes.

This inquiry has also engaged with the role of socio-economic structures and historical legacies. Colonialism, for instance, may not have directly caused this self-interest, but its policies of divide-and-rule and the imposition of extractive economic institutions likely eroded pre-existing communal trusts and incentivized self-preservation behaviors (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Rodney, 1972). Furthermore, contemporary issues like inequality and weak institutions create environments where prioritizing personal survival becomes a rational response (Sen, 1999; North, 1990).

Finally, the paper has analysed how certain interpretations of religion can foster a metaphysical evasion of responsibility. A literalist "GOD-SATAN" worldview, which attributes all outcomes to external, unquestionable entities, can absolve individuals of agency, nurturing a culture of

inaction and unaccountability that ultimately serves the self by removing the burden of responsibility (Sturdy, 2021; Gifford, 1998).

This paper is, therefore, a philosophical exploration of these interconnected themes, using lived experience as its foundational evidence to argue for a more nuanced understanding of the internal obstacles to African advancement.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design cantered on a tripartite methodological framework**:** Observation, Empirical Review, and Theoretical Integration**.** This structured approach ensures that the research is grounded in lived experience, contextualized within public discourse, and rigorously analysed through established scholarly concepts. The interplay of these three methods facilitates a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the research problem.

2.1. Critical Participant Observation

The theoretical base of this study is Critical Participant Observation, observation that was carried out over a duration of forty five years in different Tanzanian and East African societies. The provided course of action is founded upon the ethnographic tradition that supposes deep immersion into the cultural setting so that the meanings and logic per the which social action occurs would be understood (Atkinson, 2017; DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). The most important dimension is the practice of reflexivity to which the practice surpasses description to challenge and analyse the forces field, social relations and historical contingencies in order to ascertain the observed phenomena (Madison, 2012).

Data Collection: Data were collected by being submerged and viewed in significant domains of social concern... This is equivalent to the principle of thick description, explained by Geertz (1973) that tries to document the multifaceted Ness and symbolism of the social actions in a relevant situation.

Analysis of data: The thematic coding procedure was repeated... It is through this that raw observation becomes conceptualized and this is the essence of the process of qualitative inquiry and ensures that the results are systematically acquired in line with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

2.2. Systematic Empirical Review

Such review of news media is a kind of document analysis where newspapers are viewed as the public records where the societal discourses and issues occur (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2008). This approach is intended to achieve triangulation, through another source of data to cross-check and contextualize results of the primary source of observation and boost the validity of the study (Denzin, 2017; Flick, 2018). Media frame analysis offers a clue of how social issues are being defined and perceived in the public (Entman, 1993). The data application of media is not new in qualitative research to investigate social phenomena in their manifestation in the public (Hansen and Machin, 2019).

2.3. Theoretical Integration

It presupposes the systematic literature review to map and synthesize the necessary scholarly work and provide its framework within the framework of the research (Jesson et al., 2011; Snyder, 2019). It is in the name of theoretical triangulation, where various perspectives are used to understand a complex set of data more holistically (Denzin, 2017; Patton, 2015). It is based on the principle of adductive analysis, according to which the researchers shift between empirical data and theory back and forth to come up with the most reasonable answer to the phenomenon at hand (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Having a logical analytical framework is a necessity to organize a qualitative inquiry and direct data interpretation (Ravitch and Riggan, 2016).

2.4. The Scope

This paper has noted the negative hyper-individualism in modern East Africa communities, whose main information source is the Tanzanian society with multiplication by Kenya and Uganda. The paper focused on the period after gaining independence, especially in 2000-2024, and it researched the inner cultural and metaphysical obstacles to the development of the African society. The research includes community relationships, institutional behavior, and religion in which self-interest was ardent in terms of failed collective action and mismanagement of the state resources. Based on the adaptations of participatory observation, media analysis, and theoretical integration, the study gave particular focus on urban and semi-urban views and eliminated any macroeconomic and general historical comparison to preserve the narrow scope of its analysis on the obstacle between collective progress and cultural barriers in specific geographical and time settings.

3. Theoretical Framework and Analytical Synthesis

In this section the author incorporates a number of theoretical perspectives that rely on moral philosophy and institutional economics, African communitarian philosophy, and sociological perspective of religion in a bid to develop a complicated structure of analysis. This combined conceptual prism allows the systematic explanations of the phenomena of harmful hyper-individualism, which is the process of metamorphosis of universal self-interest into culturally-specific forms which contribute to collective wellbeing destruction in modern African cultures, both structurally and metaphysically.

3.1. The Philosophical Terrain: From Universal Self-Interest to Detrimental Hyper-Individualism

Philosophy has long debated self-interest, from Hobbes' (1651) psychological egoism to Rand's (1964) ethical egoism. Our analysis distinguishes between universal self-interest, which can be channelled productively (Arevuo, 2023), and what we term detrimental hyper-individualism a form where the pursuit of self-gain actively and consistently undermines the collective foundations necessary for societal flourishing (Bussen et al., 2024). This is not merely the presence of self-interest but the absence or failure of the countervailing forces of altruism (Batson, 2011) and communal ethics.

3.2. African Philosophy and the Communal Ideal: The Promise and the Tension

The communitarian ethos of philosophies like Ubuntu (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 2002) provides a crucial normative benchmark. Ubuntu posits that an individual's humanity is realized through reciprocal relationships with others. However, scholars like Gyekye (1997) and Wiredu (1996) argue that traditional societies balanced communalism with a recognition of individual agency. The observed "hyper-individualism" thus represents not a return to a pre-colonial past but a modern pathology—a breakdown of this delicate balance under the pressures of contemporary political and economic life, creating what Appiah (1992) might describe as a state of moral confusion.

3.3. Political Economy and Institutional Analysis: The Structural Reinforcement

The work of Acemoglu & Robinson (2012) on extractive institutions and North (1990) on institutional path-dependency provides a structural lens. Colonialism created institutions that rewarded loyalty and rent-seeking over productivity and public service. This historical legacy, combined with contemporary weak governance and high inequality (Sen, 1999), creates a system where detrimental hyper-individualism is often a rational survival strategy, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle.

3.4. The Sociology of Religion: Fatalism and Evaded Agency

The paper draws on sociological studies of religion in Africa (Gifford, 1998; Bediako, 1995) that analyze how certain Pentecostal and charismatic theologies, with their strong emphasis on spiritual warfare and divine providence, can foster a culture of fatalism. This "metaphysical evasion" structurally mirrors the concept of the "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin, 1968), but in a cognitive realm: when everyone attributes failure to Satan, no one is responsible for fixing the fence

4. Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a tripartite analysis, weaving together the primary data from participant observation, a review of empirical cases from Tanzanian and East African media, and their integration with the established theoretical framework. This approach demonstrates that the observed patterns are not isolated but are reflected in public discourse and can be robustly explained through scholarly concepts.

4.1. The Metaphysics of Evaded Agency

The observation identified a prevalent tendency to attribute both success and failure primarily to divine will or demonic interference, a worldview that actively discourages critical inquiry and personal accountability. This was observed in instances where the clear, human causes of a failure, such as the collapse of a community project due to embezzlement, were reframed as a spiritual attack, thereby shifting focus away from those responsible. This pattern is not merely anecdotal but is reflected in the broader public discourse, as evidenced by empirical reviews of regional media. For example, a report in Tanzania's *The Citizen* detailed a failed municipal water project

where, despite an official investigation citing technical flaws and contractor negligence, local discourse predominantly attributed the failure to "evil spirits," demanding ritual cleansing over a technical audit (Mwangasa, 2023). A similar case was reported in Uganda, where farmers' associations blamed "curses" for poor harvests, diverting crucial attention from agricultural improvements (Kato, 2022). Theoretically, this phenomenon aligns with Gifford's (1998) analysis of how certain religious interpretations can foster a culture of passivity. It represents a "metaphysical evasion" of the human agency that is central to Sen's (1999) "capabilities" approach to development. The convergence of lived observation and documented news stories demonstrates how this worldview structurally absolves individuals and institutions from responsibility, creating a significant barrier to developmental problem-solving by undermining the very agency required for progress.

4.2. The Economics of Fragmentation: Failed Collective Action

The observed pattern of communal initiatives faltering where individuals prioritize immediate, personal gain over larger, shared future benefits finds consistent validation in regional economic reporting. This dynamic was evident in the failure of local projects, such as shared water sources or farmer cooperatives, where the temptation for short-term individual profit overrode long-term collective interest. Empirical analysis of regional business journalism substantiates this observation; for instance, *The EastAfrican* has documented how internal distrust and "side-selling" persistently cripple agricultural cooperatives across Kenya and Tanzania. A specific 2024 case study detailed the collapse of an Arusha dairy cooperative after most members breached their contract to sell milk secretly to a competing processor, thereby sacrificing stable, long-term pricing for immediate, albeit fleeting, personal gain (Muthoni, 2024). Theoretically, this scenario is a classic illustration of Olson's (1965) logic of collective action, wherein rational individual choices, such as becoming a free-rider or engaging in side-selling culminate in collective failure and economic loss for the entire group. Furthermore, these cases demonstrate a fundamental failure to establish the conditions Ostrom (1990) identified as essential for managing common-pool resources, notably the absence of robust, monitored agreements and deeply ingrained shared norms. The empirical evidence thus confirms that the observed behavior is not merely a social peculiar issue but a phenomenon with demonstrably negative and measurable economic consequences across East African society.

4.3. Institutional Distrust and the "Sina Uchungu" (I Feel No Pain) Mentality

The deeply ingrained attitude of "Sina Uchungu" ("I feel no pain"), observed as a deliberate emotional and ethical detachment from public assets, manifests in the reckless misuse of government property and a general tolerance for the decay of public infrastructure. This perception of the collective good as belonging to no one is starkly illustrated by media investigations. A 2023 piece in *Mwananchi* revealed that a majority of a regional administration's vehicles were inoperable due to rampant misuse for private business and a systemic neglect of maintenance, encapsulated by a local official's shrug: "It's a government car; when it breaks, the government will fix it" (Juma, 2023). A parallel sentiment was documented in Kenya, where residents of public housing estates expressed personal indifference to the upkeep of common areas, placing the entire burden of repair on a faceless "government" (Waweru, 2023).

Theoretically, this widespread detachment signals a catastrophic breakdown of the social contract and a profound deficit of social trust (Fukuyama, 2011). The "sina uchungu" mentality is more than a cultural trait; it is a rational, though ultimately destructive, adaptation to a system dominated by extractive institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012), where individuals have learned that their personal investment in the public good will neither be reciprocated nor valued, leading to a vicious cycle of neglect and institutional failure.

4.4. The Political Economy of Spiritual Exploitation

A symbiotic relationship has emerged between religious entrepreneurs and their congregations, forming a distinct political economy of spiritual exploitation. This dynamic is characterized by self-proclaimed prophets who market miraculous solutions for personal enrichment, while a segment of the populace, seeking wealth without work, willingly participates in this transactional faith. This observed phenomenon receives consistent documentation in East African media, where investigative reports detail the mechanics of these exploitative networks. A stark example was profiled in Kenya's *The Standard*, where a "prophet" sold "prayer oil" at exorbitant prices to impoverished followers, who in turn liquidated vital assets like livestock in the hope of divine financial intervention, bypassing practical income-generating activities (Njagi, 2024). Concurrently, Tanzanian media outlets like *Nipashe* have launched campaigns directly challenging the opulent lifestyles of pastors who minister to the poor (Saiboko, 2023). Theoretically, this ecosystem functions as a religious market (Gifford, 1998), where the "supply" of supernatural goods by hyper-individualistic religious leaders meets the "demand" from followers seeking unearned advantage a manifestation of what can be termed a "selfish laziness." This market relationship, as empirically verified, systematically corrodes the core principles of diligence and personal responsibility that underpin both traditional communal ethics and the modern capitalist ethos, thereby actively impeding socio-economic development.

5. The Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this inquiry substantiates that an internal culture of pervasive self-interest represents a formidable, yet critically under-theorized, impediment to African progress. Through a rigorous tripartite methodology integrating forty-five years of critical participant observation, systematic empirical review of East African media, and robust theoretical integration, the study reveals how this culture manifests as a socio-metaphysical barrier to development. The evidence demonstrates a consistent pattern of detrimental hyper-individualism that actively undermines collective action, erodes public trust through the "sina uchungu" (I feel no pain) mentality, and fosters metaphysical evasion of agency through worldviews attributing causality solely to external spiritual forces. This study confirms the historical backgrounds of the extractive institutions and current structural inequalities as vital background but the internal cultural and ethical dispositions have been the driving engine of immobility. The huge paradox between communitarianism ideologies of old philosophies like the Ubuntu and the present system of affairs which depict the scramble of selfishness is one of the reasons as to why such transformative strategies should be implemented. Consequently, sustainable progress necessitates a two-pronged approach to the

consideration of both the political-economic organization and the creation of a planned cultural, ethical, and spiritual renaissance founded on the rebirth of the collective responsibility and human agency.

A multi-level intervention must be put in place to overturn this popular culture and encourage the shared prosperity. They should add compulsory courses in critical thinking, civic ethics and financial literacy oriented in the reversal of the fatalistic way of thinking in the world and in educating in the real benefits of collective action and individual responsibility. Besides rhetorical communalism, development policy must promote organized collaborative economics by promoting transparent legal model forms of agricultural cooperatives and savings societies which display material advantages of cooperation. In order to raise the degree of the popular responsibility, one will have to introduce such signs of the localized governance as Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys that will enable to see the expenditures of corruption and interrupt the sina uchungu mentality. Simultaneously, interfaith discourses should re-read religious doctrine, emphasizing more on human agency and stewardship, and in reaction to passive fatalism and prosperity gospels. Finally, transformation of leadership through national programs that create and train ethical leaders in different areas is significant in re-branding leadership as service and not wealth amassment. These conjoint interventions are one method of offering the holistic manner of addressing the socio-metaphysical impediments to the African development that are entrenched.

Author Contributions:

The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Studies on Religion and Philosophy, 2025, 1(2), 24-39
https://doi.org/10.71204/3ssf9n84

The Positive Impact of Buddhist Meditation Camps on Campers' Environmental Awareness: Empirical Evidence from China

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Received: 22 October 2025 /Accepted: 5 November 2025 /Published online: 8 November 2025

Abstract

This study aims to explore the impact of Buddhist meditation camps on campers' environmental awareness and analyze the moderating role of social support. A questionnaire survey was conducted, targeting campers who participated in temple meditation camp activities from February 2024 to May 2024. A total of 1200 questionnaires were distributed, and 1082 valid questionnaires were recovered, with an effective rate of 90.17%. The study found that Buddhist meditation camp activities have a significant positive impact on enhancing campers' environmental awareness, specifically demonstrated by the increase in the frequency and duration of meditation effectively enhancing environmental awareness. However, the increase in social support played a weakening moderating role in this process, meaning that high levels of social support weakened the positive impact of meditation frequency and duration on environmental awareness. This finding suggests that when promoting meditation camp activities, it is essential to fully consider the needs of campers with different levels of social support and to develop more targeted environmental education strategies to maximize the environmental education effect of meditation camp activities.

Keywords: Buddhism; Meditation Camps; Environmental Awareness; Social Support; Moderating Role

1. Introduction

Since its establishment, Chinese Buddhism has emphasized concepts such as dependent origination, the emptiness of all phenomena, the equality of all beings, and harmonious coexistence. These core teachings reflect Buddhism's respect for and protection of the natural environment. The concept of dependent origination comes from the "Sutra on the Merit of Building Stupas," which states: "All phenomena arise from causes and conditions; I explain these

as causes and conditions. When the causes and conditions cease, the phenomena perish. This is what I teach." This principle highlights the interdependence and impermanence of all things, encouraging people to recognize the interconnectedness and mutual existence of all elements in nature. The equality of all beings is elucidated in the "Diamond Sutra": "All phenomena are equal, without any high or low." This teaching advocates that all life forms are equal and should not be distinguished by rank or status, which is reflected in the care and protection of plants and animals. Harmonious coexistence is emphasized in the "Flower Ornament Sutra": "The mind, Buddha, and all sentient beings are not different from each other." This stresses the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, advocating for the cherishing of nature and the avoidance of ecological destruction. Therefore, Buddhism not only promotes compassion but also emphasizes the protection of the natural environment.

Over time, Buddhist ecological concepts have developed and manifested in various historical periods and regional cultures. In China, Buddhist ecological concepts have merged with the natural views of Confucianism and Daoism, forming a unique ecological culture. For example, Zen monks often live in seclusion in mountains and forests, demonstrating respect and care for nature through intimate contact and protective behaviors. The Zen way of life emphasizes inner peace and awareness, as well as the protection of nature and the avoidance of environmental harm. Many Zen temples are located in picturesque natural environments, embodying the ideal of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

In modern society, the rapid development of industrialization and urbanization has put unprecedented pressure on the natural environment. Issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion force humanity to rethink its relationship with nature. Environmental awareness is not only about attention to environmental issues but also about recognizing and practicing the concept of sustainable development. Buddhist ecological concepts align with modern environmental awareness in many ways, attracting increasing attention and becoming an important intellectual resource for addressing environmental problems.

Buddhist meditation camps, as an important form of Buddhist practice, not only have a profound impact on participants' spiritual lives but also bring about positive behavioral changes. Meditation, through sitting quietly and contemplating, brings the body and mind into a state of tranquility and focus, aiming for self-awareness and self-transcendence. People who participate in meditation camps for an extended period often achieve better emotional control, psychological balance, and inner peace. In terms of spiritual enhancement, meditation helps purify the mind, improving personal awareness and insight. Through meditation, participants can more clearly understand themselves, dialogue with their inner needs and desires, thereby reducing dependence on external material things and increasing understanding of the essence of life. This inner awakening and self-awareness not only lead to psychological health and happiness but also encourage individuals to make more responsible and meaningful choices in life.

In terms of behavioral changes, meditation camp activities often emphasize lifestyle adjustments, advocating simplicity, moderation, and respect for life. The meditation process is also one of constant reflection and self-correction. Through meditation, participants can more clearly recognize the impact of their actions on the surrounding environment, consciously

reducing negative environmental impacts. For example, many meditators actively reduce the use of disposable plastic products, participate in waste sorting and recycling, and reduce their carbon footprint. These behavioral changes are concrete manifestations of the positive influence of meditation camp activities on individuals.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the impact of Buddhist meditation camp activities on the enhancement of campers' environmental awareness and to analyze the moderating role of social support. Specifically, this study collected data through a questionnaire survey from campers who participated in temple meditation camp activities from February 2024 to May 2024. A total of 1200 questionnaires were distributed, and 1082 valid questionnaires were recovered, with an effective rate of 90.17%. The study results indicate that Buddhist meditation camp activities have a significant positive effect on enhancing campers' environmental awareness. Further analysis revealed that social support plays a significant moderating role between the participation in meditation camp activities and the enhancement of environmental awareness. Specifically, campers with high social support show more significant improvements in environmental awareness through meditation camp activities.

The significance of this study is multi-faceted. First, it provides empirical evidence for the relationship between Buddhist meditation camp activities and the enhancement of environmental awareness, enriching the modern research content on Buddhist ecological concepts. With empirical data support, this study further verifies the positive role of Buddhist meditation camp activities in enhancing individual environmental awareness, emphasizing the practical significance of Buddhism in modern society. Second, this study offers practical guidance for the design and promotion of meditation camp activities by temples. The results suggest that enhancing the construction of social support systems can further improve the environmental education effects of meditation camp activities. This finding is valuable for temples in organizing and promoting meditation camp activities. Temples can establish comprehensive social support networks to provide more emotional support and resources to participants, thereby enhancing the educational effect on environmental awareness. Finally, this study highlights the importance of social support in enhancing environmental awareness. Social support is not only crucial for individual psychological health but also a key factor in promoting positive behavioral changes. In the future, during the promotion of meditation camp activities, relevant institutions and organizations should focus on building social support systems, offering various forms of support to help participants better understand and practice environmental concepts.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Subjects

The subjects of this study are campers who participated in a large Buddhist temple meditation camp in China between February 2024 and May 2024. The reason for selecting this group is that they may be influenced by Buddhist ecological concepts during the meditation camp, thereby enhancing their environmental awareness. A total of 1200 questionnaires were distributed, and 1082 valid questionnaires were recovered, with an effective rate of 90.17%.

(1) Criteria for Selecting Subjects:

Participants must have attended at least one meditation camp during the study period.

Participants must be over 18 years old to ensure they have independent cognitive abilities and can complete the questionnaire.

Participants must voluntarily participate in this study, understand the purpose and content of the research, and agree to provide relevant information.

(2) Basic Characteristics of the Subjects:

The questionnaire collected basic demographic information of the participants, including gender, age, education level, occupation, and place of residence. This information helps analyze the impact of different demographic characteristics on the research results and is used as control variables in data analysis.

(3) Data Collection Process:

Data were collected on-site during the meditation camp by distributing questionnaires in person. Additionally, questionnaires were distributed online via the temple's official website and social media platforms to expand the coverage of data collection. During the data collection process, the research team explained the purpose and requirements of the questionnaire in detail to ensure participants understood and voluntarily participated. Moreover, anonymity and voluntariness of participants were ensured in the design and distribution of the questionnaire, providing detailed instructions to ensure the authenticity and reliability of the data.

(4) Sample Representativeness and Validity:

The sample for this study comes from a specific temple meditation camp, providing a certain level of representativeness. To enhance the generalizability of the research results, the sample selection aimed to cover participants of different genders, ages, education levels, and occupational backgrounds. During data processing, all questionnaires underwent preliminary review to exclude incomplete or invalid ones, ensuring the quality and completeness of the data.

2.2. Research Variables

The core variables of this study include three main components: participation in meditation camp activities, environmental awareness, and social support.

(1) Independent Variable - Participation in Meditation Camp Activities:

This variable assesses participants' involvement in the meditation camp activities, including meditation frequency, duration of each session, and participation motivations (such as seeking inner peace, pursuing spiritual growth, etc.). These indicators quantify the extent of participants' engagement in the meditation camp activities.

(2) Dependent Variable - Environmental Awareness:

This variable measures participants' cognition, attitudes, and behaviors towards environmental protection. Drawing from Zhou (2023) and others' research, participants' environmental awareness is reflected through their daily habits. It includes five specific questions:Turning off lights when leaving an empty room.Not stepping on grass for convenience.Saving water and reusing it when possible.Choosing not to purchase overly packaged products and opting for alternatives (for personal use, not for gifts).Walking or cycling for short distances within 3 km.Each question is surveyed using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 to 5 represent: never, rarely, occasionally, often, and always, respectively. Higher scores indicate stronger environmental awareness. These indicators help us understand the specific impact of meditation camp activities on participants' environmental awareness.

(3) Moderating Variable - Social Support:

This variable analyzes the moderating role of social support in the relationship between participation in meditation camp activities and the enhancement of environmental awareness. Social support refers to the care and assistance individuals receive from their social network, including both objective material support and subjective emotional support. Drawing from the research of Li (2015) and Wang (2024) social support types for campers are defined to include spiritual and material help from family, relatives, friends, and community organizations. Emotional support refers to the care and understanding participants receive during meditation camp activities, while material support refers to concrete help and resources in their daily lives. These indicators help analyze the role of social support in promoting the enhancement of environmental awareness.

(4) Control Variables:

To ensure the accuracy of the research results, some control variables are considered, such as gender, age, education level, and occupation. These variables may affect the participation in meditation camp activities and environmental awareness, thus they need to be controlled in the data analysis to eliminate their confounding effects.

2.3. Research Tools and Methods

This study employs a questionnaire survey method to collect data and uses various statistical analysis methods for data analysis.

(1) Questionnaire Design:

The questionnaire is divided into three parts: basic information, participation in meditation camp activities, and environmental awareness and social support. The basic information section includes gender, age, education level, occupation, etc. The meditation camp participation section evaluates participants' meditation frequency, duration, and motivation. The environmental awareness and social support sections assess participants' levels of environmental awareness and social support through multiple-choice questions and Likert scales. The questionnaire design references relevant literature and established scales to ensure reliability and validity.

(2) Pre-Survey and Revision:

Before the formal survey, a small-scale pre-survey is conducted to gather feedback from participants. Based on the pre-survey results, the questionnaire is revised and optimized to ensure clarity and operability. The pre-survey also verifies the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, laying the foundation for the formal survey.

(3) Data Collection:

Data is collected on-site during the temple meditation camp activities by distributing questionnaires in person. Additionally, the questionnaire is distributed online via social media platforms to expand the coverage of data collection. Throughout the data collection process, participants' anonymity and voluntariness are ensured, and detailed instructions are provided to guarantee the authenticity and reliability of the data.

(4) Data Analysis Methods:

The data analysis includes descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and moderation effect analysis. Descriptive Statistics: This analysis describes the basic characteristics of the participants and their participation in meditation camp activities, providing an understanding of the sample's fundamental attributes.

Correlation Analysis: Pearson correlation coefficient or Spearman correlation coefficient is used to analyze the relationship between participation in meditation camp activities and environmental awareness.Regression Analysis: Regression analysis is used to test the impact of participation in meditation camp activities on environmental awareness.

In the regression model, environmental awareness (EA) is the dependent variable, participation in meditation camp activities (PMA) is the independent variable, and the effects of control variables such as gender, age, and education level are considered. The specific model is:

$$EA_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PMA_i + \beta_2 Control_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

When analyzing the moderating effect of social support (SS) on the relationship between participation in meditation camp activities and the enhancement of environmental awareness, hierarchical regression analysis is used. This method tests the moderating effect of social support and examines how different levels of social support influence the relationship between participation in meditation camp activities and environmental awareness. The specific model is:

$$EA_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PMA_i + \beta_2 PMA_i * SS_i + \beta_3 Control_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

3. Research Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistical Results

Table 1 presents the basic information and distribution of the main variables for the 1082 campers who participated in this study. The total sample size is 1082, with a balanced gender distribution: 49.91% male and 50.09% female. Participants' ages range from 18 to 70 years, with an average age of 44.3 years. The education levels vary from elementary school to postgraduate and above, with the highest number of participants holding a postgraduate degree or higher,

totaling 292 people, accounting for 26.99%. In terms of occupational distribution, students, office workers, freelancers, and retirees are evenly represented, each making up about a quarter of the sample. Regarding participation in meditation camp activities, the average monthly participation frequency is 4.54 times, with an average meditation duration of 102 minutes per session. The average scores for environmental awareness and social support are 19.05 and 8.01, respectively, indicating high scores in these areas among the participants. These descriptive statistics provide the foundational data for subsequent correlation analysis, regression analysis, and moderation effect analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistical Results of Sample Data

Variable Name	Group	Number	Percentage
Sample size	-	1082	100%
Sex	Male	540	49.91%
	Female	542	50.09%
Age	Average	44.3	-
	Range	18-70	-
Education Level	Elementary School	179	16.54%
	Middle School	160	14.79%
	High School	185	17.10%
	College	102	9.43%
	Undergraduate	164	15.16%
	Graduate and above	292	26.99%
Occupation	Students	264	24.39%
	Commuter	277	25.60%
	Freelance	273	25.23%
	Retired	268	24.77%
Frequency of Meditation	Average number of	4.54	-
	Range	1-10	-
Meditation Duration	Average length of time	102M	-
	Range	30-180M	-
Environmental Awareness	Average Score	19.05	-
Social Support	Average Score	8.01	-

The Spearman correlation matrix in Table 2 reveals several significant correlations among the variables, which are crucial for understanding the impact of meditation camp activities on environmental awareness and social support. Age and Meditation Duration: There is a significant negative correlation between age and meditation duration (-0.069**), indicating that as participants age, the duration of each meditation session decreases. This may reflect the physical or time limitations faced by older participants. Occupation and Environmental Awareness: A significant positive correlation (0.055*) between occupation and environmental awareness suggests that participants from different occupational backgrounds exhibit varying levels of environmental awareness. This may be due to the different influences of occupational backgrounds and work environments on personal environmental behaviors and attitudes. Social Support and Meditation Frequency: The significant negative correlation (-0.053*) between social support and meditation frequency indicates that campers with higher levels of social support tend to meditate less frequently. This might be because those receiving more social support already have strong social networks and emotional support in their daily lives and do not need to seek additional psychological and emotional satisfaction through frequent meditation camp activities. In contrast, campers with lower levels of social support may rely more on meditation camp activities for inner peace and emotional support, leading to more frequent participation. Although these correlation coefficients are relatively low, their significance highlights the importance of considering demographic characteristics in the study of meditation camp activities. These findings further reveal the complex and diverse interactions between meditation camp activities, environmental awareness, and social support.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis of Major Variables

	Gender	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Meditation Frequency	Meditation Duration	Environmental Awareness	Social Support
Gender	1	0.034	-0.054	0.023	0.027	-0.004	-0.014	-0.012
Age	0.034	1	0.046	-0.006	-0.026	-0.069	0.042	0.043
Education Level	-0.054	0.046	1	-0.011	-0.023	-0.028	-0.01	-0.033
Occupation	0.023	-0.006	-0.011	1	0.009	-0.021	0.055	-0.005
Meditation Frequency	0.027	-0.026	-0.023	0.009	1	-0.021	0.02	-0.053
Meditation Duration	-0.004	-0.069	-0.028	-0.021	-0.021	1	0.015	-0.002
Environmental Awareness	-0.014	0.042	-0.01	0.055	0.02	0.015	1	0.036
Social Support	-0.012	0.043	-0.033	-0.005	-0.053	-0.002	0.036	1

3.2. Main Effect Analysis Results

To study the impact of campers' meditation duration and frequency on environmental awareness, four regression models were used. Models (1) and (2) present results without control variables, while models (3) and (4) include control variables such as gender, age, education level, and occupation. In Model (1), meditation frequency has a significant positive effect on environmental awareness, with a regression coefficient of 0.285 and a t-value of 8.03, indicating that higher meditation frequency correlates with stronger environmental awareness. This result shows strong statistical significance even without any control variables, suggesting that meditation frequency is a crucial factor influencing environmental awareness. Model (3): After adding control variables such as gender, age, education level, and occupation, the regression coefficient for meditation frequency increases to 0.392, with a t-value of 9.42, remaining significant at the 1% level (***). The introduction of control variables makes the model more accurate and further confirms the positive impact of meditation frequency on environmental awareness. This influence remains significant even after considering other potential confounding factors. Model (2) analyzes the impact of meditation duration on environmental awareness. The results show that meditation duration also has a significant positive effect on environmental awareness, with a regression coefficient of 0.086 and a t-value of 3.17, indicating that longer meditation duration correlates with stronger environmental awareness. This suggests that both meditation frequency and duration play important roles in enhancing environmental awareness. After adding control variables in Model (4), the regression coefficient for meditation duration is 0.108, with a t-value of 4.17, indicating that longer meditation duration correlates with stronger environmental awareness. The inclusion of control variables further validates the significant positive impact of meditation duration on environmental awareness. Additionally, control variables such as gender, age, and occupation also play significant roles in this model. Gender shows a significant negative effect in both Models (3) and (4), indicating that females have significantly lower environmental awareness compared to males. Specifically, the regression coefficient for gender in Model (3) is -0.095 with a t-value of -2.51, and in Model (4), it is -0.891 with a t-value of -3.24. This may reflect gender differences in environmental awareness, requiring further exploration of the underlying reasons. Age has a significant positive effect on environmental awareness in both Models (3) and (4), with regression coefficients of 0.213 (t-value of 5.68) and 0.247 (t-value of 6.23), respectively, indicating that older individuals have stronger environmental awareness. This could be because older individuals, influenced by life experiences and environmental changes, have a deeper understanding and concern for environmental issues. In Model (4), education level has a negative effect on environmental awareness, with a regression coefficient of -0.212 and a t-value of -1.98, suggesting that individuals with higher education levels might be influenced by complex factors affecting their environmental awareness. Further research is needed to uncover the reasons behind this.

Table 3. Main Effect Analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Environmental Awareness	Environmental Awareness	Environmental Awareness	Environmental Awareness
Meditation Frequency	0.285***		0.392***	
	(8.03)		(9.42)	
Meditation Duration		0.086**		0.108**
		(3.17)		(4.17)
Gender			-0.095***	-0.891***
			(-2.51)	(-3.24)
Age			0.213***	0.247***
			(5.68)	(6.23)
Education Level			-0.071	-0.212*
			(-0.05)	(-1.98)
Occupation			0.328**	0.469**
			(2.34)	(3.18)
_cons	5.01***	3.29***	2.38***	3.22***
	(9.83)	(8.24)	(5.21)	(4.04)
N	1082	1082	1082	1082
R^2	0.070	0.091	0.089	0.103
adj. R^2	0.067	0.102	0.095	0.100

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

3.3. Moderating Effect Analysis Results

To explore the moderating role of social support on the relationship between campers' participation in meditation camp activities and their environmental awareness, this study constructed interaction terms for social support with meditation frequency (social support * meditation frequency) and social support with meditation duration (social support * meditation duration). These interaction terms were then examined in relation to environmental awareness (see Table 4). The results show that the interaction term of social support and meditation frequency in Model (3) exhibits a significant negative moderating effect, with a regression coefficient of -0.297 and a t-value of -6.29. This indicates that the increase in social support weakens the positive impact of meditation frequency on environmental awareness. Similarly, the interaction term of social support and meditation duration in Model (4) also shows a significant negative moderating effect, with a regression coefficient of -0.091 and a t-value of -5.12. This suggests that the increase in social support weakens the positive impact of meditation duration on environmental awareness. These results indicate that although meditation camp activities (including both frequency and duration) have a significant positive impact on environmental awareness, social support plays a complex moderating role, weakening this positive relationship. This might be because campers with high social support have already achieved emotional and psychological satisfaction in other areas, leading to a relatively lower need for enhanced environmental awareness. In conclusion, when promoting meditation camp activities to enhance environmental awareness, it is essential to consider the moderating role of social support and develop more comprehensive and personalized promotion strategies.

Table 4. Moderating Effect Analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Environmental Awareness	Environmental Awareness	Environmental Awareness	Environmental Awareness
Meditation Frequency	0.285***		0.263***	
	(8.03)		(7.26)	
Meditation Duration		0.086**		0.096**
		(3.17)		(3.85)
Gender			-0.092***	-0.410***
			(-2.47)	(-2.83)
Age			0.206***	0.256***
			(5.09)	(5.38)

Education Level			-0.083	-0.135*
			(-0.09)	(-2.07)
Occupation			0.331**	0.366**
			(2.52)	(2.78)
Social Support*Meditation Frequency			-0.297***	
			(-6.29)	
Social Support*Meditation Duration				-0.091**
				(-5.12)
_cons	5.01***	3.29***	4.85***	4.02***
	(9.83)	(8.24)	(8.32)	(7.07)
N	1082	1082	1082	1082
R^2	0.070	0.091	0.092	0.102
adj. R^2	0.067	0.102	0.107	0.105

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

4. Discussion

4.1. The Impact of Meditation Frequency on Environmental Awareness

This study found that the frequency of campers' meditation has a significant positive impact on their environmental awareness. This result indicates that the higher the meditation frequency, the stronger the environmental awareness of the campers. This aligns with some existing studies that suggest Buddhist meditation camp activities can enhance participants' environmental awareness. For instance, the study by Miao Fangming (2006) and others found a close connection between participating in Buddhist meditation camp activities and campers' ecological awareness. However, this study further delves into the specific mechanisms by which meditation frequency affects environmental awareness, revealing how frequent meditation camp activities promote changes in

campers' cognition and attitudes toward environmental protection through continuous psychological and behavioral training.

Specifically, an increase in meditation frequency means that campers are more exposed to and practice Buddhist ecological concepts. Through sitting quietly and meditating during the meditation process, participants can deeply reflect on their relationship with nature and understand the Buddhist teachings of interdependence and coexistence, thereby enhancing their respect for and awareness of environmental protection. Furthermore, frequent meditation camp activities provide more opportunities for campers to experience and internalize these ecological concepts, gradually forming a green lifestyle. For example, frequent meditation camp activities can make campers more conscious of reducing resource waste and maintaining environmental hygiene, thereby enhancing their overall environmental awareness.

The difference between this study and previous studies lies in the quantitative analysis of data, providing more specific and clear empirical support. By analyzing 1082 valid questionnaires, this study verifies the significant correlation between campers' meditation frequency and environmental awareness and further reveals the universality and significance of this relationship across different gender, age, and education level groups. This not only enriches the existing research findings but also provides new perspectives and methods for future research.

4.2. The Impact of Meditation Duration on Environmental Awareness

In addition to meditation frequency, this study also found that meditation duration has a significant positive impact on environmental awareness. Specifically, the longer the meditation duration, the stronger the environmental awareness of the campers. Long meditation camp activities help participants deepen their understanding of Buddhist ecological concepts, enhancing their motivation and behavior towards environmental protection. This study explores the unique mechanisms by which meditation duration affects environmental awareness, revealing how long meditation promotes stronger environmental awareness through deep psychological experiences and behavioral adjustments. Long meditation camp activities provide campers with opportunities for deep reflection and introspection. Through continuous sitting and meditating, participants can transcend daily trivialities and enter a more tranquil and focused mental state. In this state, campers can more clearly recognize the impact of their behavior on the natural environment, thereby inspiring a sense of responsibility and mission for environmental protection. Long meditation camp activities also help participants cultivate a simple and restrained lifestyle, reducing excessive dependence on material things and paying more attention to resource conservation and environmental protection in daily life.

This study differs from previous studies in that past research often lacked quantitative analysis of meditation duration as a variable. Through specific measurement of meditation duration, this study reveals its significant impact on environmental awareness. By conducting regression analysis on data from 1082 valid questionnaires, this study finds that, regardless of the inclusion of control variables (such as gender, age, education level, etc.), the positive impact of meditation duration on environmental awareness remains significant. This not only confirms the role of long

meditation in enhancing environmental awareness but also provides important empirical evidence for future research.

4.3. The Moderating Role of Social Support

This study found that social support significantly moderates the relationship between campers' participation in meditation camp activities and the enhancement of environmental awareness. However, contrary to expectations, the increase in social support actually weakens the positive impact of meditation frequency and duration on environmental awareness. This result contrasts sharply with some previous studies and warrants further exploration.

Firstly, social support weakens the positive impact of meditation frequency on environmental awareness. Generally, high levels of social support are thought to provide individuals with more emotional and material assistance, enhancing their engagement in various activities. However, this study found that although meditation frequency has a significant positive impact on environmental awareness, this effect weakens when social support levels are high. This may be because campers with high social support have already achieved sufficient emotional satisfaction and psychological support in their daily lives, thus having a relatively lower need for enhanced environmental awareness through meditation camp activities. This finding suggests that in promoting meditation camp activities, it is necessary to consider the different needs for environmental education among campers with varying levels of social support and develop more targeted promotion strategies.

Secondly, social support also weakens the positive impact of meditation duration on environmental awareness. Similar to meditation frequency, long meditation camp activities are supposed to significantly enhance campers' environmental awareness through deeper psychological and behavioral training. However, this study found that the positive impact of meditation duration on environmental awareness is also weakened when social support levels are high. This may be because campers with high social support have already gained rich resources and support in other areas of life, reducing their additional need for enhanced environmental awareness through meditation camp activities. High social support campers may have already internalized many environmental behaviors in their daily lives, so long meditation does not significantly further enhance their environmental awareness.

This finding differs from some previous studies, such as those by Jolly (2021) and Fancourt (2021), which suggested that social support could significantly enhance individuals' positive behavioral changes in various activities. However, the results of this study indicate that, in specific contexts, social support may play a complex moderating role, weakening the impact of certain activities on individual behavior and awareness. This suggests that when researching the moderating role of social support, it is necessary to consider its specific mechanisms of influence in different contexts and types of activities more carefully.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Conclusion

Through empirical analysis of 1082 campers, this study deeply explores the impact of Buddhist meditation camp activities on environmental awareness, revealing the positive roles of meditation frequency and duration in enhancing environmental awareness. Specifically, the study found that campers with higher meditation frequency and longer duration have stronger environmental awareness, indicating that frequent and long meditation camp activities can help campers understand and internalize Buddhist ecological concepts more profoundly, thereby enhancing their cognition and attitudes towards environmental protection. This result aligns with some previous studies, confirming the significant role of Buddhist meditation camp activities in enhancing individual environmental awareness. However, this study also found that social support plays a weakening moderating role in this process. When social support levels are high, the positive impact of meditation frequency and duration on environmental awareness weakens. This may be because campers with high social support have already achieved sufficient emotional and psychological satisfaction in their daily lives, thus having a relatively lower need for enhanced environmental awareness through meditation camp activities. This finding suggests that in promoting meditation camp activities, it is essential to consider the needs of campers with different levels of social support and develop more targeted environmental education strategies to maximize the environmental education effect of meditation camp activities. This study not only provides empirical evidence for the relationship between Buddhist meditation camp activities and the enhancement of environmental awareness but also offers valuable references for temples and environmental organizations in designing and promoting meditation camp activities. At the same time, the research results provide new perspectives and methods for further exploring the moderating role of social support in different cultural backgrounds and social environments.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite providing empirical evidence for the relationship between Buddhist meditation camp activities and the enhancement of environmental awareness, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the sample mainly comes from campers at a specific temple, which may pose issues of sample representativeness. Future research could expand the sample range to include more regions and different types of meditation camp participants to improve the generalizability of the research results. Secondly, this study uses a cross-sectional survey design, which cannot determine the strong causal relationship between meditation camp activities and the enhancement of environmental awareness. Future research could adopt a longitudinal research design to track changes in campers' environmental awareness at different time points to further verify the long-term effects of meditation camp activities. In summary, this study empirically verifies the positive role of Buddhist meditation camp activities in enhancing campers' environmental awareness and reveals the complex moderating role of social support. This provides valuable references for temples in designing and promoting meditation camp activities and offers new directions for further research into the application of Buddhist ecological concepts in modern society.

Author Contributions:

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding:

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Studies on Religion and Philosophy, 2025, 1(2),40-53
https://doi.org/10.71204/9r0mqr20

Temple Garden Cultural Landscapes: An Initial Exploration

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Received: 28 October 2025 /Accepted: 7 November 2025 /Published online: 8 November 2025

Abstract

Temple gardens in China embody a synthesis of religious philosophy, aesthetic cultivation, and ecological adaptation. They represent the spatial materialization of Buddhist cultural values, the Chinese garden-making tradition, and a cosmological worldview in which nature and human cultivation are deeply interrelated. While modern scholarship has produced rich work on Buddhist architecture, monastic economies, and the symbolism of Chinese gardens, temple gardens as a unique cultural landscape category—particularly their cultural logic, aesthetic patterns, and socio-historical functions—remain insufficiently theorized in a systematic manner. This paper conducts an initial exploration of temple garden cultural landscapes, focusing on their origins, spatial forms, cultural meanings, and contemporary implications. Drawing on historical sources, landscape studies, and cultural theory, the study demonstrates that temple gardens are not merely scenic or devotional spaces; rather, they function as material expressions of Buddhist cosmology, ethical cultivation, social exchange, and ritual order. Their landscapes are shaped not only by religious symbolism but also by environmental adaptation and social-economic conditions, including monastic agrarian systems and community interactions. Through analyzing representative temple garden cases and the evolution of monastic garden cultures, this paper argues that the core of temple garden cultural landscapes lies in the interplay between sacredness and everyday life, withdrawal and engagement, nature and cultivation. Furthermore, the study highlights contemporary challenges, including heritage protection pressures, commercialization, and the need to reinterpret temple gardens as living cultural landscapes rather than static museum-like artifacts. By reframing temple gardens through integrated cultural landscape theory, the paper seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions in heritage studies, landscape architecture, and religious cultural history regarding how traditional cultural landscapes can be meaningfully preserved, reactivated, and sustained in the present.

Keywords: Temple Garden; Cultural Landscape; Buddhism; Chinese Garden History; Sacred Space

1. Introduction

The cultural landscape of Chinese temple gardens represents a distinctive synthesis of religious symbolism, aesthetic philosophy, and ecological adaptation. These landscapes emerged through the long-term integration of Buddhism into Chinese cultural traditions following its introduction during the Han dynasty. As Buddhism rooted itself in Chinese society, it did not simply remain as a foreign spiritual doctrine but entered into dialogue with native philosophical systems, including Confucianism's ethical order and Daoism's reverence for natural spontaneity. The process of Sinicization was not only intellectual but spatial and material: the construction of temples in scenic mountains and valleys became a defining feature of Buddhist spatial identity. The phrase "monks dwell in famous mountains" captures the intentional geographic logic behind temple siting. Temples were established where mountains, forests, watercourses, and mists reinforced a sacred atmosphere, and these natural surroundings were not left untouched but carefully cultivated into meditative gardens. Such landscapes expressed an overarching worldview in which nature is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in spiritual cultivation. Embedded in these gardens are systems of meaning that relate to Buddhist contemplative practices, cosmological imagery, and aesthetic notions that value emptiness, tranquility, and the subtle interplay between human presence and natural environment. Therefore, temple gardens must be understood not simply as scenic sites but as living cultural landscapes in which the spatial environment is deliberately shaped to foster ethical discipline, meditative awareness, and spiritual transformation.

The historical evolution of temple gardens is closely tied to the organizational, economic, and cultural functions of monastic communities. Early monastic settlements required not only places for worship and meditation but also means for survival and self-sufficiency. As indicated in historical sources and supported by the referenced study, many temples developed monastic economies that included agricultural fields, orchards, medicinal gardens, and tea plantations, forming integrated ecological and cultural systems that supported daily monastic life (Mallarach et al., 2014). Over time, these practical horticultural spaces acquired symbolic significance and were gradually aestheticized into formal gardens, reflecting the growing sophistication of garden-making traditions during the Tang, Song, and later dynasties. Temple gardens thus functioned simultaneously as economic spaces, ecological systems, ritual settings, and artistic expressions. For example, the cultivation of tea in temple gardens not only fulfilled nutritional and medicinal needs but became deeply embedded in the spiritual culture of Zen Buddhism (Wan, 2024). The aesthetic practice of tea and Zen being of one flavor reflects the belief that the sensory simplicity of tea drinking corresponds to the disciplined clarity of meditative practice. This convergence of daily activity with spiritual cultivation contributed to a distinct ritualized domesticity, in which ordinary acts—walking, gardening, drinking tea, sweeping fallen leaves—were transformed into methods of maintaining mindfulness and moral self-regulation. Thus, temple gardens cultivated not only plants but also ethical character, perceptual awareness, and communal identity.

In addition to their functional and symbolic dimensions, temple gardens hold significant cultural and scholarly value as material embodiments of the Chinese philosophical understanding of the unity between humans and nature. Their landscape composition—featuring layered

mountain views, winding paths, hidden pavilions, flowing waters, and carefully arranged vegetation—enacts spatial metaphors drawn from Buddhist cosmology and classical aesthetics. The design principles emphasize quietness, subtlety, and the evocation of contemplative states rather than grand display. This distinguishes temple gardens from imperial gardens, which often sought to demonstrate political power, and from private literati gardens, which centered on personal leisure and poetic taste. Temple gardens instead prioritize collective rituality, spiritual introspection, and the cultivation of virtuous dispositions (Dill, 2024). Yet, in contemporary society, the cultural legacy of temple gardens faces considerable pressures. Rapid tourism development, commercial exploitation, loss of ecological integrity, and the erosion of genuine ritual practice risk reducing temple gardens to mere visual attractions. If the living cultural functions of these landscapes are diminished, their aesthetic and symbolic coherence may be lost. Therefore, academic inquiry into the origins, meanings, and cultural logic of temple gardens is not only of historical and intellectual importance but also vital for informing heritage preservation strategies that sustain both material structures and intangible cultural values. By approaching temple gardens as holistic cultural landscapes—rather than as static architectural relics—we may better understand how these spaces have historically mediated relationships between nature, community, spiritual cultivation, and aesthetic experience. Such understanding is essential for ensuring that temple garden landscapes remain living, dynamic cultural environments, capable of speaking meaningfully to contemporary social and spiritual life.

2. Historical Evolution and Cultural Formation

The cultural landscape of temple gardens did not emerge suddenly, nor was it simply borrowed from pre-existing architectural or horticultural traditions. Instead, it evolved gradually through layered historical interactions between Buddhism, Chinese philosophical traditions, regional environmental conditions, and shifting socio-political contexts. As Buddhism took root in China, temples became not only religious centers but also custodians of ecological knowledge, social organization, and aesthetic cultivation. The temple garden thus developed into a distinct spatial expression of the Chinese understanding of the relationship between nature and human cultivation. To understand how this cultural landscape formed, it is essential to trace its historical evolution across four major phases: initial localization, institutional consolidation, aesthetic refinement, and contemporary transformation.

2.1. Early Localization: Buddhism's Encounter with Chinese Landscape Tradition

When Buddhism first entered China during the Han dynasty, it encountered deeply established cultural traditions that shaped how landscapes were perceived and valued. Chinese philosophical thinking, influenced heavily by Daoism, emphasized natural spontaneity, mountain retreats, and the search for metaphysical insight through immersion in nature. Meanwhile, Confucianism reinforced a moral order grounded in social harmony and structured community life. Initially, Buddhist temples were urban and functional, serving primarily as translation sites and religious meeting spaces rather than as spatial embodiments of contemplative practice. Over time, however, monks observed that Chinese spirituality was intimately tied to natural settings, and they began

deliberately seeking remote and scenic locations for meditation and teaching. This shift laid the groundwork for temple gardens, in which the surrounding environment played an active role in spiritual cultivation.

The migration of temples to mountainous regions during the Wei–Jin and Southern–Northern Dynasties was influenced both by philosophical aspiration and socio-political instability. As educated elites withdrew from public life, mountains came to symbolize purity, transcendence, and intellectual freedom (Flere, 2024). Buddhist monks, sharing similar values of renunciation, began constructing monasteries along forested ridges, near springs, and within secluded valleys. These temple sites emphasized harmony with the natural terrain rather than architectural dominance over it. The earliest temple gardens were therefore not designed in an ornamental sense but existed as organically integrated natural settings used to nurture meditative stillness. This early phase established the foundational principle that the temple garden is not merely an aesthetic embellishment, but a spiritual environment shaped by and for contemplative life.

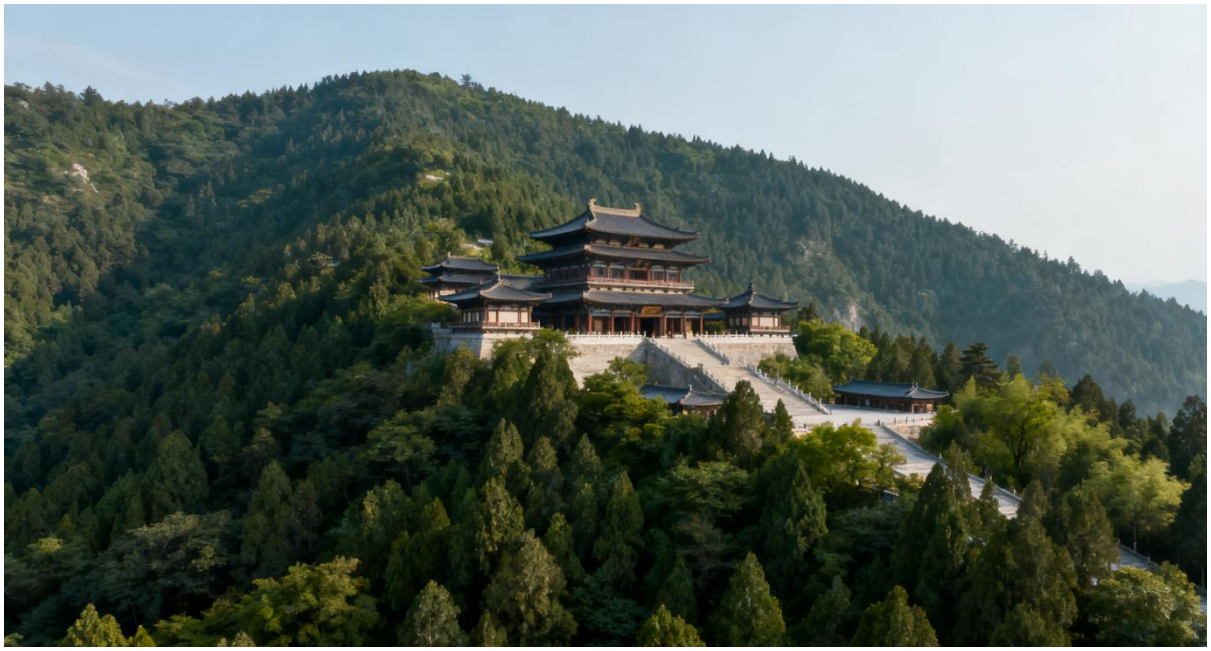

Figure 1. Temple Garden Landscape

2.2. Institutional Development: Monastic Economy and Cultural Self-Sufficiency

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, Buddhism received formal recognition and patronage, leading to the expansion of temple complexes into organized religious institutions. With increasing populations of resident monks, temples required sustainable means of supporting daily life. This necessity led to the development of monastic economies, which included agricultural fields, orchards, forests, and especially tea plantations surrounding temple grounds. Gardening and cultivation became integral to monastic routine, not as secular labor but as part of spiritual discipline. The environment was managed carefully to provide food, medicine, shelter, and ritual materials, linking ecological stewardship to ethical cultivation (Okyere-Manu et al., 2022). Over

time, these ecologically functional spaces adopted symbolic, spiritual, and aesthetic associations, transitioning into the intentional cultural landscapes recognizable today.

Tea cultivation holds particular significance in this historical stage, emerging as both a practical resource and a medium of spiritual refinement. Temples not only grew tea leaves but also developed techniques of preparation, brewing, and ceremonial offering. The expression “Tea and Zen share a single flavor” encapsulates how the simplicity and attentiveness required in tea-making became metaphors for meditative clarity. The garden spaces where tea was grown and consumed thus served as sites of philosophical dialogue, poetic composition, and contemplative communion. This convergence of daily sustenance and spiritual cultivation reinforced the idea that the temple garden is not a decorative retreat, but a site where ordinary practice transforms into ethical and perceptual awakening.

2.3. Aesthetic Refinement: Landscape Design and Symbolic Space in the Song and Ming Dynasties

By the Song dynasty, Chinese aesthetic culture reached new levels of sophistication, influenced by Neo-Confucian thought and Chan (Zen) Buddhism. Intellectuals emphasized the correspondence between external landscapes and internal states of mind, inspiring a more deliberate approach to arranging temple spaces. Temples began refining their spatial organization, incorporating pathways, courtyards, pavilions, and water features designed to cultivate rhythmic experiences of movement, focus, and stillness. These gardens remained rooted in natural topography but were crafted to produce emotional subtlety and contemplative perception. The emphasis was not on ornate beauty but on the creation of conditions conducive to meditation, including quietness, filtered light, flowing water, and layered visual depth.

During the Ming dynasty, temple gardens influenced and were influenced by the private gardens of literati culture. Yet, the two remained distinct in intent. Whereas literati gardens foregrounded artistic expression and personal sentiment, temple gardens foregrounded clarity of mind and spiritual discipline. Their visual language tended toward simplicity, asymmetry, and grounded natural textures, intentionally avoiding excessive ornamentation. Spatial sequencing played a central role: one encountered the garden not in a single panoramic view, but through gradual revelation. Trees, walls, and stone arrangements guided one from everyday awareness into meditative attention. This practice of structuring perception through landscape became one of the defining features of temple garden aesthetics.

2.4. Modern Transformation: Heritage, Tourism, and Cultural Continuity

In the Qing dynasty and early modern period, temple gardens accumulated centuries of cultural memory, becoming pilgrimage destinations and regional cultural landmarks. Their significance extended beyond religious practice, contributing to literature, painting, philosophy, and medicine. However, political instability, modernization, and secularization in the late 19th and 20th centuries weakened monastic communities and disrupted the holistic systems that sustained temple gardens. Many gardens suffered damage or fell into neglect, while others were reorganized as public scenic sites, detaching the landscape from its ritual and spiritual foundations.

In contemporary society, temple gardens face a dual challenge: commercialization and museumification. On one hand, tourist-driven development risks transforming temple gardens into visual spectacles divorced from spiritual purpose. On the other hand, treating temple gardens solely as cultural relics freezes them in time, preventing the dynamic practices—gardening, meditation, tea preparation, seasonal rituals—that give them living meaning. The preservation of temple gardens therefore requires more than architectural repair; it requires the protection of intangible cultural life, including daily rhythms, environmental ethics, and embodied practices passed across generations. Only by sustaining these living traditions can temple gardens continue to function as evolving cultural landscapes rather than static monuments.

3. Spatial Composition and Cultural Landscape Characteristics

The spatial composition of temple gardens reflects a carefully constructed interaction between religious symbolism, environmental conditions, and aesthetic sensibility. Temple landscapes are never arranged arbitrarily; rather, their layout embodies doctrinal ideas and philosophical worldviews, while simultaneously responding to the natural features of local terrain. The organization of space in temple gardens involves both physical structures—such as halls, pavilions, courtyards, and paths—and intangible experiential dimensions, such as silence, seasonal rhythms, and the sensory movement of the visitor. Understanding temple gardens as cultural landscapes therefore requires examining how architecture, vegetation, water, and ritual practice converge to shape a unified spiritual environment. This chapter analyzes the spatial structures commonly seen in temple gardens and identifies the key cultural landscape characteristics that allow these spaces to function as environments of contemplation, cultivation, and aesthetic revelation.

3.1. Overall Spatial Layout: Axis, Sequence, and Hierarchy

The overall spatial arrangement of temple gardens typically follows a sequential and hierarchical organization, which guides the visitor inward from the outer world toward the sacred center of spiritual engagement. Most temples employ a longitudinal layout aligned along a central axis, beginning from the entrance gate and progressing through a sequence of courtyards and halls. This arrangement is not merely structural; it performs a spiritual function by choreographing the visitor's bodily movement and mental attention. As one moves deeper into the temple, external distractions gradually fall away, replaced by increasing quietness and symbolic clarity (Kakalis, 2024). Each spatial threshold marks a stage of transition, mirroring the gradual deepening of meditative awareness.

Yet the main axis alone does not define temple spatial experience. The organization also relies on asymmetric balance and layered transitions. Side courtyards, secluded gardens, and meditation cloisters break up the linear progression, creating spaces where time seems to slow and perception sharpens. The visitor is thus encouraged not only to move forward but also to pause, reflect, and shift modes of attention. The path is not rigid or monumental; rather, it is subtly modulated, reflecting the Buddhist belief in the need to cultivate awareness gradually. Such spatial

sequencing transforms the temple garden into an environment of perceptual training, where architecture and landscape guide the mind toward clarity and tranquility.

3.2. Relationship Between Architecture and Nature

The relationship between built structures and natural features is central to the identity of temple gardens. Unlike imperial gardens that emphasize political grandeur, or literati gardens that highlight aesthetic playfulness, temple gardens foreground harmonious integration between buildings and the surrounding environment. Temples are often constructed on mountainsides, along river valleys, or near springs. The architecture does not dominate the landscape; instead, it follows the contours of the land, adjusting to slopes, ridges, and natural vegetation patterns. This approach reflects the Buddhist principle of non-interference with nature, allowing the environment to become an active participant in the spiritual experience of the temple.

The careful positioning of halls, pavilions, and cloisters ensures that natural elements—such as trees, stones, wind, and water—are incorporated into everyday perception. Courtyards are oriented to frame views of distant peaks; windows are placed to catch shifting light and shadow; and meditation rooms are located near streams or groves, where natural sounds cultivate stillness. The built environment thus becomes a mediator between individuals and the natural world. Rather than separating inside from outside, temple architecture emphasizes permeability, where walls, screens, and openings encourage continual dialogue with the surrounding landscape (Gissen, 2023). This subtle integration contributes to a sense of continuity between human presence and natural flow, aligning spatial experience with the Buddhist aspiration of transcending ego boundaries.

3.3. Vegetation and Seasonal Rhythm

Vegetation plays a profound role in shaping the symbolic and experiential qualities of temple gardens. The trees, flowers, and grasses chosen for cultivation are not simply ornamental, but carry moral, spiritual, and poetic associations. For example, pine trees represent endurance and integrity, bamboo conveys humility and emptiness, and plum blossoms signify resilience in adversity. These plants serve as visual metaphors that reinforce the ethical ideals embedded in monastic life. Monks interacting with these plants—whether sweeping fallen leaves or pruning branches—engage in acts of silent contemplation, merging physical labor with inner reflection.

The seasonal transformation of vegetation adds another dimension to the garden's experiential rhythm. Spring blossoms, summer shade, autumn leaves, and winter snow form a cyclical pattern that grounds spiritual cultivation in the passage of natural time. This seasonal awareness is not incidental; it is intentionally cultivated as part of meditative practice. Observing the slow change of colors, textures, and scents encourages patience, attentiveness, and acceptance of impermanence—central tenets in Buddhist philosophy. In this way, the temple garden is not static but temporally alive, a space where the unfolding of natural cycles becomes inseparable from the development of contemplative awareness.

3.4. Water, Sound, and the Sensory Environment

Water is another essential element in the spatial vocabulary of temple gardens. Springs, streams, ponds, and stone water basins appear throughout temple grounds, not only for practical purposes such as washing or irrigation but as components of a sensory environment designed to facilitate mental stillness. The sound of flowing water masks intrusive noise and provides a steady auditory backdrop, drawing attention inward. Water also serves as a visual mirror, reflecting sky, rooflines, and surrounding vegetation, establishing a poetic dialogue between the ephemeral and the material. In Buddhist symbolism, water often represents clarity of mind—the reflective surface of awareness unclouded by distraction.

Sound more broadly plays a critical role in shaping the atmosphere of temple gardens. The ringing of a bell, the chanting of sutras, the rustling of leaves, and the distant echo of footsteps all contribute to the acoustic identity of the space. Rather than overwhelming the senses, these sounds are subtle and rhythmic, supporting a meditative soundscape that encourages stillness and focus. The integration of water and sound into the spatial design illustrates how temple gardens cultivate embodied perception—spiritual insight is awakened not through abstraction, but through the lived experience of sensory harmony.

3.5. Paths, Movement, and Experiential Guidance

The pathways of temple gardens are not designed for efficiency but for experiential transformation. Paths often follow winding routes, guiding visitors through shifting perspectives and alternating modes of attention. This spatial progression echoes Chan Buddhist practices that emphasize attentiveness to each step and breath. Walking becomes a form of meditation, where bodily movement and mental focus converge. The uneven placement of stones, the gradual ascent or descent of slopes, and the alternation between open and enclosed spaces create tactile experiences that heighten bodily awareness.

The layout of paths also structures narrative meaning. One begins at the outer world of secular distraction and gradually moves toward the inner realm of contemplative presence. Along the way, transitional spaces—gateways, turning points, shaded groves—serve as symbolic thresholds, prompting reflection and reorientation. This method of spatial storytelling transforms the temple garden into a journey of the mind, where the external act of movement parallels internal transformation. In this sense, the garden is not only a space to be seen but a space to be experienced through mindful passage.

3.6. Cultural Life and Embodied Practice

Temple gardens are not simply visual or spatial environments; they are lived cultural spaces shaped by ritual, daily routine, and collective memory. Activities such as meditation, chanting, tea preparation, calligraphy, and horticultural care all take place within garden spaces. These practices are not additions to the temple environment; they are what animate and sustain the landscape as a living cultural system. In the historical formation of temple gardens, tea culture in particular played an important role in linking ordinary daily life with spiritual discipline, reinforcing the garden’s integration of material and transcendent dimensions.

Embodied participation in these activities ensures that temple gardens remain dynamic rather than static. The garden acquires meaning through repetition, labor, and sensory immersion. Monks and visitors alike engage with the garden not as spectators but as participants in an ongoing process of cultivation. This lived dimension distinguishes temple gardens from preserved heritage sites, whose landscapes are often maintained but not inhabited. Without the continuity of embodied practice, the spiritual and cultural significance of temple gardens would be diminished, leaving only aesthetic form without its animating core.

4. Contemporary Significance and Preservation Strategies

The cultural landscape of temple gardens continues to hold profound relevance in contemporary society, despite rapid social change, urban expansion, and the globalization of cultural values. Temple gardens are not simply historical relics or aesthetic attractions; they are complex cultural systems in which religious meaning, ecological awareness, and aesthetic cultivation are intrinsically linked. Their spatial design encodes an understanding of the relationship between human beings and the natural world that remains deeply resonant in the face of modern environmental and psychological challenges (Devlin, 2025). In order to preserve these landscapes effectively, it is first necessary to clarify their cultural significance in contemporary life. Only on this basis can appropriate strategies be developed to ensure that temple gardens continue to function as living cultural environments, rather than becoming static monuments or commercialized spectacles divorced from their spiritual foundations.

4.1. Contemporary Cultural Relevance of Temple Gardens

Temple gardens offer a compelling vision of how environment shapes human consciousness. In an era defined by constant distraction, accelerated consumption, and digital saturation, the contemplative atmosphere embodied in temple landscapes stands as an alternative mode of existence. The spatial structures of temple gardens—marked by slowing pathways, layered thresholds, and rhythmic transitions—deliberately guide individuals away from haste and toward attentive presence. The experience of moving through a temple garden encourages a shift from external stimulation to inner awareness. This capacity to recalibrate perception is of psychological value in contemporary society, where stress, anxiety, and mental fragmentation have become widespread. Thus, temple gardens retain significance not only as heritage landscapes but as environments capable of supporting mental and emotional well-being.

Their cultural relevance can also be understood through the ethical and ecological values they express. Temple gardens model a mode of dwelling in which human activity aligns harmoniously with natural cycles. The cultivation of plants, management of water, and respect for terrain reflect a worldview that recognizes human beings as participants within broader ecological processes. Such a perspective contrasts with the anthropocentric logic that has driven industrial development and environmental degradation. The ecological practices embedded in temple gardens—particularly sustainable horticulture and resource conservation—offer practical and philosophical insight for contemporary environmental ethics (Berebon, 2025). In this sense, temple gardens

represent not an antiquated past, but a renewable cultural resource capable of informing ecological thinking in the present.

4.2. Threats to Cultural Integrity and Ecological Authenticity

Despite their cultural importance, temple gardens face serious challenges. One major threat comes from the commercialization of heritage landscapes, often driven by tourism development. In many regions, temples have become commercial destinations where visitors are encouraged to consume visual experiences rather than engage in contemplative practice. This shift alters the spatial atmosphere of temple gardens, replacing silence with spectacle and weakening the moral and spiritual environment that historically sustained monastic life. The result is a superficial aestheticization of the garden landscape in which the symbolic and ritual dimensions are overshadowed by visual entertainment.

A second threat arises from over-preservation, in which temple gardens are protected as static historical artifacts rather than as dynamic living environments. When preservation policies focus exclusively on architectural structures or visual appearance, they risk erasing the intangible cultural practices—meditation, horticultural labor, tea rituals, seasonal ceremonies—that infuse the garden with meaning. In such cases, the garden is preserved materially but loses its cultural vitality. As noted in research on temple-based tea landscapes, the cultural significance of these spaces depends fundamentally on the continuation of daily practices rather than solely on physical form. Thus, purely architectural restoration without practice-based revitalization results in a landscape that is visually intact but spiritually hollow.

A third challenge comes from environmental pressure, including urban development, pollution, and climate change. Many temple gardens were historically located in remote mountain regions; these environments have increasingly become sites of infrastructure expansion and commercial real estate development. Such encroachment can alter hydrological systems, disrupt plant communities, and degrade visual and acoustic landscapes. Moreover, shifting climate patterns threaten the seasonal rhythms that define temple garden experience, affecting plant growth, flowering cycles, and the sensory textures of the garden environment. Without proactive ecological stewardship, the environmental foundation of temple gardens may gradually deteriorate.

4.3. The Need for Integrated Preservation Approaches

Given these challenges, preserving temple gardens requires approaches that are holistic rather than purely architectural or economic. Preservation must recognize temple gardens as cultural landscapes, meaning that their value lies not only in physical structures but in the dynamic relationship among environment, human practice, and symbolic meaning. A garden without its ritual and daily life is no longer a temple garden but merely a scenic site. Therefore, preservation must integrate three interdependent dimensions: spiritual continuity, ecological stewardship, and cultural transmission.

Spiritual continuity refers to the maintenance of the contemplative and ethical practices that animate temple life. This continuity depends on the presence of monastic communities or dedicated practitioners who interact with the landscape through meditation, gardening, chanting,

and ritual observance. These practices ensure that the landscape remains a lived environment rather than a static backdrop. Preservation strategies must therefore support the social and institutional conditions that allow such communities to thrive rather than treating monastic presence as an obstacle to tourism development.

Ecological stewardship involves protecting the environmental conditions and biological diversity that give temple gardens their distinct sensory and symbolic qualities. This includes the maintenance of traditional planting patterns, water systems, and soil management techniques, as well as the preservation of local plant species adapted to regional climates. Modern conservation science can support these efforts, but it must respect the historical ecological knowledge embedded in monastic horticultural traditions. Preservation should not impose uniform landscape standards but recognize the regional variations that give temple gardens their unique identities.

Cultural transmission requires the continued teaching and practice of the skills, narratives, and symbolic interpretations associated with temple gardens. This transmission cannot be accomplished solely through written documentation or museum displays. It must occur through active participation, apprenticeship, and shared ritual experience. Teaching tea making, practicing seasonal gardening, reciting sutras, composing calligraphy, and guiding meditation in garden spaces are all forms of cultural transmission that sustain the living meaning of temple landscapes.

4.4. Community, Education, and Public Engagement

For temple gardens to maintain their relevance in contemporary society, broader public engagement must be cultivated. However, engagement should not be conflated with tourism or entertainment. Instead, communities should be invited to participate in mindful interaction with temple environments—guided walks, tea meditation workshops, horticultural participation, and contemplative ecology education. Such programs allow visitors to enter the garden not as consumers but as co-participants in a shared cultural experience.

Educational institutions can play a key role in this process. Temple gardens offer valuable resources for teaching history, aesthetics, ecology, and philosophy. Partnerships between temples and schools or universities can support research, ecological monitoring, and experiential learning programs. Students may learn not only about Buddhist culture and Chinese landscape aesthetics, but also about sustainable environmental practices embedded in historical horticultural traditions. These forms of engagement allow temple gardens to become sites of cultural learning, where modern individuals encounter alternative ways of living and thinking.

Local communities are also essential to preservation. Historically, temples often functioned as communal centers, providing charity, education, and moral guidance. Reviving these social roles can help reintegrate temple gardens into regional cultural life. When local residents participate in garden care, seasonal festivals, and practical stewardship, the garden becomes embedded in the cultural memory and identity of the community. This sense of shared ownership forms a strong foundation for sustainable preservation.

4.5. Toward a Living Future for Temple Garden Landscapes

The future of temple gardens depends on maintaining their identity as living cultural landscapes, not merely heritage sites. To achieve this, preservation must prioritize continuity of practice, integration of community, and ecological care. Temple gardens cannot be preserved through architectural restoration alone, nor can they thrive under commercial exploitation. Rather, they require conditions that allow the ongoing enactment of contemplative life within the landscape.

Such a vision aligns with broader cultural and environmental movements that recognize the value of slowness, attentiveness, self-cultivation, and ecological harmony. Temple gardens offer not escape from the modern world, but a counterpoint—a space in which individuals and communities may rediscover forms of experience that foster psychological balance, social responsibility, and ecological awareness. Their preservation is therefore not only a cultural task but a moral and environmental one.

The enduring significance of temple gardens lies in their ability to gather environment, body, and spirit into harmony. They are not relics of a vanished tradition, but reservoirs of cultural wisdom that speak to the deepest needs of contemporary life. Preserving them means preserving the possibility of a form of life grounded in attentiveness, humility, and reverence for the living world. Their future depends on our ability to recognize and sustain this possibility.

5. Conclusions

The study of temple garden cultural landscapes reveals that these spaces are far more than historical architectural environments or scenic tourist destinations; they are living embodiments of a worldview in which nature, human practice, aesthetic formation, and spiritual cultivation are interwoven into a continuous cultural field. Tracing their historical evolution shows that temple gardens emerged through the sinicization of Buddhism, the development of monastic self-sufficiency, and the refinement of aesthetic and spatial philosophies, ultimately forming an environmental model that integrates religious symbolism with ecological sensitivity. Their spatial composition demonstrates deliberate and nuanced design: axial sequences, layered thresholds, visual borrowing, seasonal vegetation rhythms, auditory modulation, and embodied pathways collectively construct environments that slow perception, refine attention, and encourage contemplative awareness. Yet temple gardens do not derive their cultural significance solely from their symbolic forms, but from the practices that animate them—meditation, tea rituals, horticultural labor, chanting, and seasonal ceremonies all serve to reaffirm the moral and emotional bonds that tie individuals to a shared environment. In contemporary society, this mode of spatial cultivation holds renewed importance. As modern life becomes increasingly characterized by acceleration, environmental exhaustion, and psychological fragmentation, temple gardens offer experiential models of slowness, ecological humility, and interior clarity. However, these cultural landscapes now face pressures of commercialization, aesthetic superficialization, and ecological decline, which threaten to reduce them to static images or commodified spectacles. Effective preservation therefore necessitates holistic strategies that protect not only material structures but also the intangible cultural life that sustains meaning across generations. Monastic

communities, local residents, cultural institutions, ecological conservation experts, and visitors must work together to maintain temple gardens as living cultural systems grounded in practice, continuity, and ethical stewardship. Only when preservation efforts recognize temple gardens as dynamic environments shaped by ongoing human engagement—rather than as artifacts frozen in time—can their spiritual, ecological, and cultural knowledge continue to serve contemporary needs and future aspirations. Ultimately, this research underscores that the value of temple gardens lies not simply in their beauty or historical significance, but in their enduring capacity to cultivate attentiveness, foster ethical relation to landscape, and offer models of harmonious coexistence between human beings and the natural world.

Author Contributions:

Conceptualization, W. X; methodology, W. X; software, W. X; validation, W. X; formal analysis, W. X; investigation, W. X; resources, W. X; data curation, W. X; writing—original draft preparation, W. X; writing—review and editing, W. X; visualization, W. X; supervision, W. X; project administration, W. X; funding acquisition, W. X. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding:

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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