

# An Inquiry into the Subjective Dimension of the “Shengsheng” Thought

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## Abstract:

“Shengsheng” (生生, here, literally “the spontaneous unfolding of life”) stands as one of the core concepts in Chinese philosophy. It first appears in *The Commentary on the Appended Phrases (Xici Zhuan) of I Ching (The Book of Changes)*, which states, “Shengsheng is what is called Yi (change)”. The text also puts forward, “The great virtue of Heaven and Earth lies in giving life, and the great treasure of sages lies in their position”. While offering a nuanced interpretation of the cosmos as a life-generating system and the moral order inherent in it, the concept reveals the essential nature of *Shengsheng* for humans—who are deemed “the most spiritual among all creatures”—to “align their virtue with that of Heaven and Earth” and participate in and facilitate the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth. Based on the relationship between humans and all things in the cosmos, humans occupy three interrelated subjective roles within the *Shengsheng* system: the physical subject (身体主体, referring to humans as embodied beings and the material foundation for moral and practical activities), the moral subject (道德主体, denoting humans’ capacity to perceive and embody the “life-giving virtue” of Heaven and Earth), and the practical subject (实践主体, representing humans’ role in acting in accordance with the laws of *Shengsheng*). Their uniqueness lies in their conscious participation in the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth, which provides valuable guidance for humans to find their place and purpose in life.

**Keywords:** *Shengsheng* (生生), Physical Subject, Moral Subject, Practical Subject, Participate in and Facilitate the Transformation and Nurturing of Heaven and Earth (赞天地化育)

## Introduction

Since the conception of “*Shengsheng*” was articulated

in *The Commentary on the Appended Phrases*, interpretations of the term have varied across different

eras, yet they generally revolve around two dimensions: the *Shengsheng* of the natural cosmos and the *Shengsheng* of moral nature and destiny (性命). By examining The Commentary on the Appended Phrases and the broader landscape of Chinese philosophy, Li Shangxin summarizes the philosophy of *Shengsheng* into five core aspects: it takes the *Shengsheng* of Heaven, Earth, and the cosmos as its foundation; it regards the interpenetration of nature and destiny as the starting point for its development; it adopts *Cheng* (诚, sincerity), *Ren* (仁, benevolence), *Yi* (义, righteousness), *Li* (礼, propriety), *Zhi* (智, wisdom), and the “investigation of things and extension of knowledge” (格物致知) as its guiding principles for action; it centers on “participating in and facilitating transformation and nurturing” (参赞化育); and it aims to “fulfill oneself, others, and all things” (成己成人成物)<sup>[1]</sup>. This framework unifies the cosmos and humans into a dynamic, processual, relational, and agentively active system, thereby capturing the true essence of “*Shengsheng*”.

## I. The Cosmic Ontology of “*Shengsheng*”

As Roger T. Ames notes, *I Ching (The Book of Changes)*, revered as the “foremost of all classics” in Chinese tradition, “its text itself embodies the ecological worldview it seeks to convey”<sup>[2]</sup>. It represents a living world shaped by immediate life experiences, and a manifestation of the *Shengsheng* cosmos as an integrated unity of origin, process, and purpose. Within this unity, “*Shengsheng* as a process” is its core meaning—an origin and purpose that are inherently embedded in the very process of *Shengsheng* itself.

First, in the living, tangible world, “*Shengsheng*” serves as its origin. The Commentary on the Appended Phrases states, “Heaven and Earth take their positions, and *Yi* (change) operates within them”<sup>[3]</sup>. Heaven and Earth form the foundation of the cosmos, and the real world of life and existence is grounded in and dependent on Heaven and Earth. Huang Yushun argues that Heaven, Earth, the cosmos, and all things—though they exist as entities—are the results rather than the prerequisites of “*Shengsheng*”<sup>[4]</sup>; they are generated by the “beings of *Shengsheng*” themselves in accordance with the principle of *Shengsheng*. (Here, “principle” does not refer to a fixed, universally binding truth, but rather to the inherent way in which beings become what they are.) *Shengsheng* is immanent in Heaven, Earth, and all things; it is the origin or metaphysical basis that enables the generation of cosmos and all things. In other words, *Shengsheng* is self-generating, driven by the dialectical interplay between the physical

and spiritual aspects of individual life. Furthermore, “the root of life lies in Yin and Yang”<sup>[5]</sup>. *The Zhuangzi-Free and Easy Wandering (Zhuangzi-Xiaoyaoyou)* observes, “Like wild horses (a metaphor for floating clouds) and dust particles, all living things breathe and interact with one another”. The real world of life exists as a *Dasein* (此在 of a communal process—where all things share a common breath and destiny, forming an integrated whole. The generation of all things in the cosmos is rooted in the “circulation and transformation of *Qi*” (气化流行) within the unity of *Shengsheng*. Wang Chong of the *Han Dynasty* explicitly stated, “Heaven and Earth combine their *Qi*, and all things generate themselves”; “Heaven covers above, Earth supports below; the lower *Qi* rises like steam, the upper *Qi* descends, and all things generate themselves in between”<sup>[6]</sup>. *The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon (Huangdi Neijing)* notes, “To go against the *Qi* of spring is to hinder the flourishing of *Shaoyang Qi*, leading to internal disorders of the *Liver Qi*... The *Yin* and *Yang* of the four seasons are the root of all things”<sup>[7]</sup>. For the Earth as a living entity, its internal movements and changes, the life activities of all things, and its external interactions with other celestial bodies collectively constitute the Earth’s existence as a living system. Although all things grow within the between Heaven and Earth and are subject to the changes of the cosmos, Heaven, Earth, and the seasonal cycles of *Yin* and *Yang*, the relationship is inherently dialectical: the life activities of all things also exert reciprocal influences on the cosmos, Heaven, and Earth. This further illustrates that the self-generating life of all things and the cosmic whole—characterized by the circulation and transformation of *Qi* in which they exist—are themselves the origin of *Shengsheng*. Li Chenggui, by contrast, argues that this self-generation of *Shengsheng* stems from its “organic nature”: the cosmos and all things form an indivisible whole. “Various domains or elements, despite their independence and particularity, maintain inherent connections and interactions; through mutual influence and interconnection, they collectively constitute a dynamic and unified whole”<sup>[8]</sup>. In this sense, “*Shengsheng* as origin” refers to the dynamically unified world itself—the dialectical movement between life itself and the relational contexts in which it exists.

Second, “*Shengsheng*” also serves as the driving force of Heaven, Earth, and all things, representing “the natural unfolding of the Dao of *Shengsheng*”<sup>[9]</sup>. Tang Junyi argued, “The entire *I Ching* essentially explains the cosmos by framing it as a process of coming and going (i.e., movement and change)”<sup>[10]</sup>. The cosmos and all things are nothing but an unobstructed, flowing process—a reality captured by the phrase “the divine has no fixed direction, and change has no constant form” (神无方而易无体).

The process of *Shengsheng* manifests as the “circulation and transformation of *Qi*” ( 气化流行 ), which Roger T. Ames describes as “a surging flow—namely, the ‘myriad things’ ( 万物 ) and ‘myriad phenomena’ ( 万有 )—formed by the unique vibrations of the various focuses of ‘*Qi*’ and their interactions with one another”<sup>[11]</sup>. Its source is referred to as “*Taiji*” ( 太极 , the Great Ultimate), and its driving force is embodied in the mutual resonance and succession of *Yin* and *Yang*. *The Commentary on the Appended Phrases* states, “Within *Yi* lies *Taiji*, which gives rise to the Two Modes (Liangyi: *Yin* and *Yang*). The Two Modes generate the Four Images (*Sixiang*: the four seasonal phases), and the Four Images generate the Eight Trigrams(*Bagua*) “. In *Explanation of the Taiji Diagram* (Taiji Tushuo), Zhou Dunyi uses the concept of “*Wuji* (the Ultimate of Non-Being) and then *Taiji*” ( 无极而太极 ) to elaborate on the generation of *Yin* and *Yang*, the Five Elements (*Wuxing*), the four seasons, and all things—each of which “possesses its own *Taiji*”—as well as the unobstructed, flowing process of the unified “*Great Taiji*” ( 一大太极 ), where “myriad things generate and regenerate, undergoing endless transformation”. Thus, “*Shengsheng* as a process” refers to the dynamic, unified process of change in which all cosmic things generate themselves and, through interactions within specific spatiotemporal contexts, achieve *Shengsheng*—encompassing the creation, nurturing, protection, fulfillment, and valuation of life, until its ultimate completion.

Finally, “*Shengsheng* as purpose” manifests as the unity of the cosmos’ most vital force and highest value<sup>[12]</sup> and the mission of all things to pursue *Shengsheng*—specifically, the unity of “the great virtue of Heaven and Earth lies in giving life” and “participating in and facilitating the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth”. *The Commentary on the Appended Phrases* asserts, “The great virtue of Heaven and Earth lies in giving life, and the great treasure of sages lies in their position”. This reveals the inherent moral connotation of “giving life”, which can be broadly understood in light of *the Laozi* (Chapter 10): “It gives birth to all things and nurtures them; it gives birth without claiming possession, acts without relying on its achievements, and leads without dominating—this is called ‘profound virtue’ ( 玄德 )”<sup>[13]</sup>. The purpose of the natural “*Shengsheng*” of the cosmos, Heaven, Earth, and all things lies in the very movement and transformation of the entire *Shengsheng* organism, rather than in a predetermined, planned “purpose” for the natural world; its only essence is “*Shengsheng*” itself. For finite, concrete beings, their purpose is to exert their “virtue of *Shengsheng*” ( 生生之德 —the virtue of aligning with the life-giving laws of the cosmos), participate in and facilitate the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth, and

contribute to the *Shengsheng* of all things, themselves, and even the cosmos. Notably, the “virtue of *Shengsheng*” is not merely a narrow moral concept; it only manifests its moral dimension in the context of humans’ conscious, rule-governed behaviors and interpersonal norms. In this sense, it represents either a compromise of individual interests for the public good (out of fear of the collective’s power) or a conscious dedication to the public good (with the goal of serving or contributing to it). However, in reality, the tension between individual and public interests is, to some extent, irreconcilable—perhaps rooted in humans’ sense of lack and insecurity. When people constantly turn their gaze outward, adopting a greedy, acquisitive attitude to seize or possess, this insecurity (and even sources of danger) may only intensify. By contrast, the “virtue of *Shengsheng*” embodies creation in accordance with objective laws; it involves inherent measures and changes such as growth and decline, waxing and waning, and fullness and deficiency. For humans, it manifests as love for the cosmos, Heaven, Earth, and all things, as well as insight into objective laws. As concrete beings, their purpose is to realize their own *Shengsheng* by exerting this “virtue of *Shengsheng*”.

As a dynamically unified whole of origin, process, and purpose, “*Shengsheng*” embodies the vitality, integrity, and pervasiveness of the living real world. At the same time, as an overarching principle summarized by ancient Chinese ancestors to explain cosmic creation, the workings of Heaven and Earth, and the interconnectedness of all things—and as a core concept of Chinese philosophy—it offers crucial guidance for understanding why and how humans should participate in and facilitate the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth.

## II. The Subjective Positioning of Humans in the “*Shengsheng*” System

The *Book of Rites* (Liji) states, “Therefore, humans embody the virtue of Heaven and Earth, the interaction of *Yin* and *Yang*, the convergence of spiritual forces ( 鬼神 ), and the essential vitality ( 秀气 ) of the Five Elements” and “Humans are the ‘heart-mind’ ( 心 ) of Heaven and Earth, the quintessence ( 端 ) of the Five Elements, and they live by partaking of flavors, distinguishing sounds, and wearing colors”. *The Book of Documents·Book* (*Shangshu*) declares, “Heaven and Earth are the parents of all things, and humans are the most spiritual among all creatures”. These passages clarify two key attributes of humans: their uniqueness as “the most spiritual beings” in the cosmos, and their dependence on all things in Heaven and Earth for survival. Chen Lai argues that the descrip-

tion of humans as “the heart-mind of Heaven and Earth” explains humanity’s significance in the cosmos from a value-based perspective <sup>[14]</sup>. These ideas align with the assertion that “the great virtue of Heaven and Earth lies in giving life, and the great treasure of sages lies in their position”. To be human is to be an agent with cognitive and practical capacities—that is, a “subject” <sup>[15]</sup>. By securing their rightful position within the *Shengsheng* system of Heaven and Earth, humans can fulfill the “virtue of Heaven and Earth”. In this process, humans act as a unity of the physical subject, moral subject, and practical subject to participate in and facilitate the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth.

Humans exist in the natural world as physical subjects—integrating body, intellect, emotion, and will. This physical existence serves as the material foundation for humans to act as moral and practical subjects, enabling them to interact with the external world. But why must humans, as physical subjects, participate in and facilitate the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth? The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon answers this question: “Humans are born from the Earth, but their lives depend on Heaven; when the *Qi* of Heaven and Earth merges, a human is formed” and “Heaven nourishes humans with the five kinds of *Qi* (from the five directions), and Earth nourishes humans with the five flavors”. *The Book of Rites-Li Yun* adds, “The foundation of food and drink lies in Heaven and Earth. Heaven and Earth produce things in accordance with seasons, and human capabilities have inherent limits”. Human life activities rely on consuming the products of Heaven and Earth, and the sources of sustenance are inevitably derived from the cosmos. Meanwhile, the production of things by Heaven and Earth follows seasonal rhythms and natural laws, and human capabilities are finite. Therefore, respecting and conforming to natural laws is essential for sustaining human survival and nourishment. However, as “the most spiritual among all creatures”, humans are not passively dependent on nature; they can proactively participate in and influence natural processes. This participation, though, must align with the “*Dao*” (道, the Way of Nature). If humans act in excess or deficiency, they will cause harm to Heaven, Earth, and nature—even endangering their own survival. This reality requires humans, while grounding themselves in their identity as physical subjects, to exert their role as moral subjects: by discerning objective laws, comprehending and emulating the “life-giving virtue” of Heaven and Earth, they lay the groundwork for proactive and righteous practice.

*The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)* states, “To follow one’s inherent nature is called the *Dao* (率性之谓道)” and “Only those who are utterly sincere (至诚)

can fully realize their own nature; by fully realizing their own nature, they can fully realize the nature of others; by fully realizing the nature of others, they can fully realize the nature of all things; by fully realizing the nature of all things, they can facilitate the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth; and by facilitating the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth, they can form a triad with Heaven and Earth” <sup>[16]</sup>. As moral subjects, humans possess the potential to comprehend the “life-giving virtue” of Heaven and Earth, and they inherently desire better lives for themselves, the cosmos, and all things. This endows humans with a unique, proactive moral responsibility and mission. The Commentary on the Appended Phrases I notes, “The continuous movement of Yin and Yang is called the *Dao*; that which perpetuates this movement is ‘goodness’ (善), and that which completes it is ‘nature’ (性)”. The Doctrine of the Mean further elaborates, “*Sincerity* is the *Dao* of Heaven; to achieve *sincerity* is the *Dao* of humans”. Human nature and the life-giving nature of Heaven and Earth are inherently consistent and interconnected. By perceiving and embodying this shared nature—inheriting and emulating it—humans can extend their influence from the internal (self) to the external (others and all things), ultimately achieving a harmonious triad with cosmos.

For humans (as physical and moral subjects) to exert influence on the cosmos, Heaven, and Earth, they must act through practice. Righteous practice is predicated on two prerequisites: an understanding of the objective world, and the proper exercise of one’s identity as a physical and moral subject. As *The Commentary on the Words and Texts (Wenyan Zhuan) of I Ching* states, “The noble person aligns their virtue with that of Heaven and Earth, their brilliance with that of the sun and moon, their order with that of the four seasons, and their fortune with that of spiritual forces. When acting ahead of Heaven’s rhythms, Heaven does not oppose them; when acting in accordance with Heaven’s timing, they conform to its seasons”. The Doctrine of the Mean adds, “Sincerity is not merely about completing oneself; it is also about completing all things. To complete oneself is ‘*Ren*’; to complete all things is ‘*Zhi*’. This is the virtue inherent in human nature, and it represents the way of integrating the internal (self) and external (world). Thus, whenever it is applied, it is appropriate”. Human practice must be rooted in a full understanding and respect for the inherent nature and developmental laws of all things. Their virtue should be as broad and selfless as that of Heaven and Earth, allowing the cosmos’ myriad things and humans to grow in their optimal ways. The ultimate goal of such practice is to achieve “the state of balance and harmony (致中和), where Heaven and Earth occupy their rightful positions and all things are



nurtured”.

### III. The Manifestation of the Human “Shengsheng” Subject

Against the backdrop of the real world—characterized by infinite spacetime, diverse matter, and complex social relations—human cognition and action are often disrupted or limited. People may struggle to clarify their position within various relationships, and the rapid changes of the external world can trigger confusion or anxiety, leading them to treat the cosmos, all things, and even themselves with an attitude of possession rather than creation. To address this, humans must reflect on their relationship with the external world and initiate change. The manifestation of a proactive, creative *Shengsheng* subject requires three key steps: first, the *Shengsheng* subject must “rectify its nature and destiny” (各正性命); second, it must “clarify its heart-mind and manifest it in the world”; and finally, through the “path of cultivation” (工夫路径)—encompassing reverence, sincerity, caution, stillness, and self-reflection—it must “fully realize its nature” (尽性) and “establish its destiny” (立命), thereby actively engaging in the creative transformation of the self and the world.

Cheng Hao once stated, “As for supreme *Ren* (benevolence), Heaven and Earth are like one’s own body, and all categories of things and myriad forms between Heaven and Earth are like one’s four limbs and hundred body parts. How could anyone look upon their four limbs and hundred body parts and not love them?”<sup>[17]</sup> The cosmos form a “great body” of which humans are an integral part. All things exist in nature and society, and their life activities—along with their dialectical interactions with the natural and social environment—collectively shape the individual’s living context. Thus, an individual’s physical condition and overall well-being are intimately connected to and integrated with the cosmos and all things.

From this perspective, as a *Shengsheng* subject, humans must first “rectify their nature and destiny”. *The Commentary on the Judgments (Tuan Zhuan) of I Ching* states, “The Dao of Qian (Heaven) undergoes transformation, enabling all things to receive their proper nature and destiny and preserve the great harmony (太和)—this is what is meant by ‘favorable and steadfast’ (乃利贞)”. In the interaction between “self-destiny” and “other-destiny”<sup>[18]</sup>, individuals clarify their position within the multi-layered system of subjects in the cosmos, Heaven, Earth, and all things. They discern the laws of cosmic *Shengsheng*, return to their inherent “original heart-mind” (本心), and realize that this heart-mind is the manifestation of the “heart-mind

of Heaven, Earth, and all things” within themselves—laying the groundwork for the overall harmony of the cosmos and all things. Second, to clarify the heart-mind and manifest it in the world, humans must face reality with a cautious, reverent, and sincere attitude, as well as an objective perspective. Only by deeply understanding reality and dispelling the obscurations of subjective assumptions and distractions can human moral practice find its rightful focus—enabling individuals to participate in and facilitate the transformation and nurturing of Heaven and Earth in a timely manner, with a proactive and creative stance. Finally, building on “rectifying nature and destiny”, “clarifying the heart-mind and realizing one’s nature” (明心见性), and “facing reality squarely”, humans must “fully realize their nature and establish their destiny” (尽性立命). By actively engaging with the world and practicing the fulfillment of others, the subject integrates their individual life into the infinite flow of cosmic *Shengsheng*.

#### IV. Concluding Remarks

By exploring the basis for humans’ threefold positioning (as physical, moral, and practical subjects) within the *Shengsheng* system through the lens of natural generation and transformation, we can, to a certain extent, help individuals more firmly clarify their position in the interaction between “self-destiny” and “other-destiny”. This clarity fosters a firm belief in righteous principles, empowering individuals to act proactively, love broadly, and dedicate themselves to the infinite flow of the *Shengsheng* world.

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