

Zhu Xi's Discourse on "Sheng Sheng": A Perspective on Life Philosophy

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Abstract: The theory of rationality and the view of life are two integral aspects of Zhu Xi's philosophy, encompassing both cosmology and the concept of life. Zhu Xi identified the concept of "conscience" (心), which embodies the essence of both the "theory of 'Li'" (理本论) and the "theory of 'Sheng'" (生本论), as a fundamental linkage connecting three logically progressive propositions: "Heaven and Earth regard life generation as their conscience," "'Ren' (仁, benevolence) is the conscience of Heaven and Earth in generating life," and "Holding the conscience of Heaven and Earth." The process of life generation by Heaven and Earth inherently possesses the attribute of supreme goodness, expressed as "Sheng Sheng" (生生, producing and reproducing life). This process gains further significance through the value ascribed to "Sheng Sheng," which is realized in the human world as the benevolence ('Ren') exhibited by humans toward all things. Furthermore, the original benevolence inherent in Heaven and Earth's act of producing and reproducing life can be discerned through human contemplation and reflection. By embracing the conscience of Heaven and Earth, humans facilitate the return of the value inherent in "Sheng Sheng." The profound meaning of "the oneness of Heaven and man" and "manifesting heavenly virtues in humanity," central to Confucianism as represented by Zhu Xi, unites the essence of life with ethical values. This synthesis bridges the connection between the universe and life, establishing a significant precursor to the philosophy of life in China.

Keywords: Zhu Xi, Life Philosophy, Sheng Sheng (生生), Conscience of Heaven and Earth, Ren

1. Introduction

In the past, the academic community predominantly analyzed Zhu Xi's philosophy through the lens of the "theory of 'Li'," which regards "Li" (理, ultimate principle) as the ultimate category, the origin of all cosmic beings, and the foundational principle of human society. "Li" is not only innate but also an unchanging and immovable entity of purity" [1]. As Zhu Xi stated, "As for 'Li,' it is just a pure and empty world, without form or trace, nor will it move" [2]. Moreover, this "Li" is characterized as "the best and the kindest" [2]. In recent years, however, scholars have increasingly advocated for the "theory of 'Sheng'," which emphasizes that "Sheng" (生, life and life-generation) is central to Zhu Xi's philosophy. These two perspectives are not contradictory but rather represent complementary aspects of Zhu Xi's philosophical system. The "theory of 'Li'" highlights the role of

“Li” in the cosmic realm, whereas the “theory of ‘Sheng’” underscores the value of “conscience” in the human realm, with “Sheng” as the ultimate pursuit.

Zhu Xi’s discourse on “Sheng Sheng” (生生, producing and reproducing life) can be summarized into three levels, with “conscience” serving as the central theme. Zhu Xi’s concept of “conscience” integrates the dual meanings of “Sheng” and “Li.” The first meaning is “dominance,” which signifies the objective regularity inherent in the metaphysical “Li.” The second is “interconnection,” which reflects the ability of humans to perceive and empathize with Heaven and Earth through introspection.

Zhu Xi’s logical progression in discussing “Sheng Sheng” begins with the conscience of Heaven and Earth in generating beings. This “conscience” is invisible and intangible yet governs the growth of all things. The conscience of Heaven and Earth is the conscience of all living things, described as a “conscienceless conscience” that is “universal and without selfish intent” [2]. This conscience, also referred to as the “Deity,” represents the “living Li” (生理 or 生生之理, the principle of life-generation) and serves as the governing principle of Heaven and Earth. Thus, the conscience of Heaven and Earth is also the “Li” of Heaven and Earth.

Next, Zhu Xi equates the conscience in generating beings with Ren. He defines Ren (仁, benevolence) as the conscience of Heaven and Earth in generating life. Zhu Xi asserts, “The meaning of Sheng (life and life-generation) is Ren,” and “Ren is entirely the meaning of Sheng” [2]. He emphasizes that Ren embodies goodness and love, thereby uniting the naturalistic “Sheng” with the ethical principle of Ren, integrating what “is” with what “ought to be.”

Finally, Zhu Xi posits that sages must establish the conscience for Heaven and Earth. While Heaven and Earth possess dominance, humans can surpass nature in certain respects [2]. Therefore, the sage must “promote the goodness of Heaven and Earth.” By perceiving the living Li within Heaven and Earth’s beings, the sage recognizes the order and benevolence of the universe, thereby achieving harmony between humanity and all things. In this way, the sage fulfills both “the nature of man” and “the nature of things.” Based on the above discussion, this paper seeks to unify the “theory of Li” and the “theory of Sheng,” thereby identifying Zhu Xi’s philosophy as a precursor to the philosophy of life in China.

2. Heaven and Earth Take Life-Generation as the Conscience

To discuss whether Heaven and Earth possess a conscience necessitates examining Zhu Xi’s cosmological schema, particularly the centrality of life-generation. Within this framework, Li and Qi are undoubtedly foundational. Zhu Xi stated, “Between Heaven and Earth, there exist Li and Qi. Li is the metaphysical Tao (道), the foundation of generation; Qi is the physical instrument, the means of generation. Therefore, the creation of all beings must receive this Li to have a nature; they must receive this Qi to have a form” [2]. Li and Qi exist in a relationship of essence and function: Li is the metaphysical foundation of generation, embodying the essence and guiding principle of all things, while Qi serves as the physical means of generation, constituting the empirical material where Li attaches and manifests. From the absolute metaphysical perspective of Li, Zhu Xi can be regarded as a monist of Li. However, just as discussing nature involves more than nature itself, discussing Li inherently includes Qi. In this sense, Zhu Xi’s philosophy also reflects a dualism of Li and Qi. Thus, Li in Zhu Xi’s thought carries dual connotations: one as the immutable, monistic Li, and the other as the dynamic and pervasive Li.

Zhu Xi examines Tai Chi from the perspective of the “unity of Li” (理一) and discusses Tai Chi (太极, i.e., Li) in terms of this unity. Simultaneously, he explores the principles governing individual things through the differentiation of all entities, addressing the nature (xing, 性, i.e., the principle of nature) inherent in each. He remarked, “Tai Chi is simply the principle of all things in Heaven and Earth. Speaking in terms of Heaven and Earth, there is Tai Chi in Heaven and Earth; speaking in

terms of all things, there is Tai Chi in each thing. Before there was Heaven and Earth, there was indeed this Li first. When it moves, Yang (阳) is produced, which is also Li; when it is still, Yin (阴) is produced, which is also Li” [2]. He further explained, “‘When numerous things are each corrected, they are each definite in size,’ meaning that numerous things are one, and one is numerous things. For the whole system is one Tai Chi, yet each thing possesses its own Tai Chi” [2]. From the perspective of the unity of Li, Tai Chi serves as a universal principle. From the perspective of differentiation, however, each entity possesses its own particular nature-Li.

However, the Li that Zhu Xi refers to as “without sentiment, without calculation, without creation” is not merely the immutable, unarranged, and irresistible “Nature”; it also encompasses an aspect of what “ought to be.” Mou Zongsan described the “essence of Tao” (道体) in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism: “In practice, the limited connects to the infinite. Therefore, the noumenon reflected upon and reached in its aspect of noumenon must be the noumenon of original nature and essence, which must be absolutely universal, the ‘one that embraces all things without exception,’ and immediately becomes the ‘wonderful expression of all things.’ It is not only the noumenon of our moral practice; it must also be the noumenon of cosmic generation and transformation, the noumenon of all existence” [3]. This “essence of Tao” corresponds to Li, Tai Chi, and nature in Zhu Xi’s system, serving as both the noumenon of moral practice and the noumenon of cosmic generation and transformation. The moral noumenon and the cosmic noumenon are the same transcendent noumenon for all things in the universe, which Zhu Xi identifies as “the conscience of Heaven and Earth.”

Regarding whether Heaven and Earth possess a conscience, there was initially debate among Zhu Xi’s disciples. Yang Daofu, a disciple of Zhu Xi, once asserted that “Heaven and Earth have no conscience,” reasoning that if Heaven and Earth had a conscience, they would necessarily possess thoughts and plans. However, in reality, Heaven and Earth have no thoughts or plans; the movement of the four seasons and the generation of all things are nothing more than the way of Nature. In response, Zhu Xi refuted this claim: if Heaven and Earth truly have no conscience, how should we interpret statements in the *Book of Changes* such as “In the Fu hexagram, we see the conscience of Heaven and Earth” and “When the great and right Way is manifest, the feelings of Heaven and Earth can be seen”? While the Fu hexagram (复卦) states that the conscience of Heaven and Earth can be observed through Fu (复, return), it does not explicitly define what the conscience of Heaven and Earth is. Song Neo-Confucian scholars interpreted the Yi Jing in contrast to Wang Bi’s view that “silent and ultimate nothingness” [4] constitutes the conscience of Heaven and Earth, instead defining its connotation as “generation.” Before Zhu Xi, Confucian scholars such as Hu Yuan, Ouyang Xiu, and Cheng Yi interpreted “In the Fu hexagram, we see the conscience of Heaven and Earth” in two ways: first, by directly elucidating the conscience of Heaven and Earth through “generation,” highlighting its characteristic of “movement”; and second, by focusing on the hexagram structure of one Yang and five Yin, rather than Wang Bi’s emphasis on the combination of Kun (坤, earth) above and Zhen (震, thunder) below [5]. Zhang Zai also revised Wang Bi’s interpretation of “Thunder rests in the midst of the earth” and “Movement ceases and returns to stillness” to “Thunder returns to the midst of the earth” and “Movement within stillness,” emphasizing that Heaven and Earth “take generation as their fundamental purpose” [6]. This approach, which uses the *Book of Changes* as a classical basis and connects the conscience of Heaven and Earth with generation, reached maturity in Zhu Xi’s philosophy. Yang Daofu’s assertion that “Heaven and Earth have no conscience” reflects the lingering influence of Taoist naturalism within Confucianism. By contrast, Zhu Xi’s interpretation, grounded in the Fu hexagram, aligns more closely with the meaning of Sheng Sheng (生生, perpetual generation).

Zhu Xi further questioned: If Heaven and Earth truly have no conscience, “then cows would give birth to horses, and peach trees would blossom with plum flowers” [2]. Yet, in reality, cows only give

birth to cows, and peach trees only blossom with peach flowers. Everything follows its “predetermined nature.” Zhu Xi thus identified this “predetermined nature” as the inner principle governing the generation and transformation of all things. He referred to it as the “Deity” (帝) of all things’ generation and transformation, equating it with the conscience of Heaven and Earth. However, this “heavenly conscience” does not operate on the level of human conscience. Instead, it is understood as “Deity,” which is not personal but represents Li, the principle of life-generation inherent in Heaven, Earth, and all things. This principle corresponds to the dynamic and prevalent Li previously discussed in a dualist sense. Consequently, Zhu Xi connects the life-generating principle of Heaven and Earth with the conscience of generation, asserting that the conscience of Heaven and Earth and the principle of Heaven and Earth represent the same noumenon under different terms [7]. Zhu Xi also stated, “The conscience is the thing that operates” [2]. The heavenly mandate operates through the conscience, “and because it operates and circulates eternally, it is called the conscience” [2]. Zhu Xi’s preference for speaking of the conscience of Heaven and Earth’s generation, rather than merely the principle of generation, underscores his emphasis on the concepts of “operation and circulation.”

Regarding the specific definition of the conscience of Heaven and Earth, Zhu Xi characterized it as a “conscienceless conscience” and explained that it “pervades all things without a self.” He argued that “all things in the world, even the smallest and most insignificant, have a conscience.... Even a single plant or tree grows toward the sun and withers in the shade; it has preferences at its core. As for Heaven and Earth, which are vast and produce innumerable creatures, they function and circulate ceaselessly, with the four seasons and day and night appearing to be driven by some external force. Heaven and Earth inherently possess a conscienceless conscience” [2]. He further elaborated, “Heaven and Earth impart this conscience to all things; when humans receive it, it becomes the conscience of humans; when things receive it, it becomes the conscience of things; when plants, trees, animals, and birds receive it, it becomes their respective consciences. It is simply the conscience of Heaven and Earth. Now you have to understand where it has a conscience and also see where it is without a conscience” [2]. The conscience of Heaven and Earth, according to Zhu Xi, is not an isolated or overarching entity separate from the consciences of all things. Instead, it is internally manifested within the conscience of all things. The individual conscience of all things is an expression of the conscience of Heaven and Earth. Zhu Xi asserted, “The conscience of all things is like the conscience of Heaven and Earth.... When Heaven and Earth create all things, every thing contains the conscience of Heaven and Earth” [2]. From the perspective of “one essence with innumerable manifestations,” the conscience of Heaven and Earth is a unified entity, representing the purpose of the continuous life generation of Heaven and Earth. It emerges from the interconnected consciences of all things within their respective life-generating processes and aligns with the principle of “one Li with myriad manifestations.” This relationship transcends distinctions such as size, quantity, interiority, exteriority, or hierarchical significance. Thus, the conscience of Heaven and Earth, in its role in generating life, is both immanent and transcendent.

Regarding why Zhu Xi appears to oscillate between asserting that “heaven and earth have a conscience” and urging people to observe the “place without conscience” in heaven and earth, one can refer to his own statements: “The growth of all things is when heaven and earth are without conscience. The desire for growth in withered things is when heaven and earth have a conscience” [2]. This is because “when all things are growing, this conscience is not invisible, but the conscience of heaven and earth is already dispersed and intertwined among them, and nothing other than this principle is revealed. When there are too many of them, it is difficult to see. But for those who know how to observe, they will see nothing but the conscience of Heaven and Earth by observing it. Only when all things return to themselves, and nothing grows, is there only one conscience of Heaven and Earth, which is clearly manifest here and easy to see” [2]. When all things flourish, the conscience of

Heaven and Earth is fully revealed; however, people often become absorbed in the vast flow of life, accustomed to the forms of life generation in Heaven and Earth, and fail to comprehend the conscience of Heaven and Earth. It is akin to the air surrounding humans or the water surrounding fish: when immersed in them, their presence is difficult to discern, and it is only under conditions of oxygen deprivation or water scarcity that their existence becomes apparent. Similarly, it is only when withered trees meet spring or withered seedlings begin to grow anew that the conscience of Heaven and Earth becomes distinctly visible.

In summary, in Zhu Xi's philosophy, the dynamically circulating principle, the principle of life generation, and the conscience of generation are different expressions of the purpose behind the creation of heaven, earth, and all things. Heaven and Earth possess both Li and a conscience, and the conscience of Heaven and Earth is generation. The universe is a continuously generating and circulating entity. Whether one resides in the "conscientious place" or the "conscienceless place," it is essential to comprehend the conscience of Heaven and Earth.

3. Ren as the Conscience of Heaven and Earth in Generating Life

The conscience of Heaven and Earth lies in generating life. But what is the essence of this generative conscience? Zhu Xi identifies it as Ren. He introduces the concepts of "Ren encompassing the four sprouts" and "Ren encompassing the four virtues." The four sprouts are compassion (惻隱), a sense of shame (羞惡), modesty (辭讓), and a sense of right and wrong (是非), with compassion serving as the foundational element governing the other three. Zhu Xi explains, "The root of it all is compassion. When one encounters situations requiring modesty, it manifests as modesty; when one feels unease, it manifests as a sense of shame and evil; when one makes distinctions, it manifests as a sense of right and wrong. Without an active and awakened element within, one would not know shame, evil, modesty, or right and wrong." Similarly, Cheng Hao asserts, "Man's conscience is filled with compassion," where the heart of compassion is the heart of benevolence and the foundation of the human conscience. A human possesses only one conscience, which, in terms of the four virtues, can be divided into Ren, Yi (義, righteousness), Li (禮, propriety), and Zhi (智, wisdom), with Ren serving as the foundation from which the other three are derived. Thus, Ren, Yi, Li, and Zhi embody a single Li, and Ren represents the principle of the human conscience. Zhu Xi's method of aligning "compassion," "a sense of shame and evil," "modesty," and "a sense of right and wrong" with Ren, Yi, Li, and Zhi, respectively, underscores the naturally dynamic nature of the heart of benevolence. For instance, one naturally feels compassion upon seeing a child fall into a well. By using the highly ethical concept of Ren to describe the conscience of Heaven and Earth in generating life, Zhu Xi imbues the cold and ever-changing Qi with the warmth of moral values. This approach clearly distinguishes his philosophy from the naturalism of Taoism and affirms the orthodox stance of Zhu Xi's Confucianism.

Ren serves as the "conscience" of Heaven and Earth, constituting the internal foundation for why Heaven and Earth prioritize generation. In other words, Ren, as the cause of "Sheng" (generation), also embodies the characteristics of "Sheng." Zhu Xi clarifies this concept at the beginning of his essay *On Ren*: "Heaven and Earth prioritize generation as their conscience, and beings, including humans, each obtain the conscience of Heaven and Earth to become their own conscience. Hence, when discussing the virtues of the conscience, although they encompass and interconnect everything, in one word, it can be summarized as Ren." [2] Zhu Xi portrays the generative nature of Heaven and Earth through the virtue of Ren, presenting Ren as the guiding tendency and trend in the processes of production and reproduction. This transcends the distinction between nature and morality, linking the "to be" with the "ought to be" and unifying Heavenly Tao (天道) and Human Tao (人道) toward the shared purpose of life-generation. Notably, the idea of connecting Ren with "the conscience of

Heaven and Earth in generating life” did not originate with Zhu Xi or the Songming Neo-Confucianists. This tradition traces back to the *Commentaries on the Appendices to the Book of Changes*, which states, “The greatest virtue of Heaven and Earth is life-generation, and the greatest treasure of the sage is his position. How do they maintain their position? By Ren.” Later, Dong Zhongshu explicitly asserts, “Ren is the conscience of Heaven” (*Book of Spring and Autumn Annals – Sequence of the Seventeenth*). Chen Lai evaluates this notion as “a significant step in the development of the cosmic form of the entity of benevolence,” which “had a profound impact on later Songming Confucianists such as Zhu Xi.” [8] However, the cosmology of Han Confucian scholars adopts an external, holistic view, requiring the subject to regulate itself through an external order of what ought to be. In contrast, the cosmology of Song Confucian scholars is deeply integrated with ontology, the theory of mind and nature, and the theory of moral cultivation. For instance, the concept of “the conscience of Heaven and Earth” reflects the external expansion of the subject’s internal essence. It integrates the natural, overarching order with human moral subjectivity, allowing both the external laws of nature and human inner freedom to develop toward supreme goodness. [9] In the Neo-Confucian discourse system, the concept of the conscience of Heaven and Earth simultaneously encompasses categories such as the theory of mind and nature, cosmology, ontology, and moral cultivation. Linking Ren with the conscience of Heaven and Earth in generating life serves as a call for individuals to practice “overcoming oneself to restore propriety,” making the supreme goodness of Ren the ultimate purpose that unites all things in Heaven and Earth. This perspective regards the conscience of Heaven and Earth as a means to transcend the boundaries between internal and external, self and object, and the division between good and evil, ultimately nurturing and transforming Heaven and Earth through benevolence.

Zhu Xi points out that “The meaning of Sheng is Ren” and “Ren is all a meaning of Sheng.” The continuous process of producing and reproducing in Heaven and Earth manifests both Sheng and Ren. Ren is rich in connotations of goodness and love, carrying a clear value orientation. If the conscience of Heaven and Earth in generating life is Ren, then the conscience of Heaven and Earth inherently embodies goodness and love, from which all things emerge. At this level, Ren is Sheng, and Sheng is Ren, achieving an essential unity between the naturalistic concept of Sheng and the ethical significance of Ren. Chen Lai considers the foundational structure of Zhu Xi’s theory of Ren as extending from the conscience of Heaven to the conscience of humans within cosmology. He argues that “Zhu Xi inherited and emphasized the thought of the Northern Song Confucian scholars that ‘Heaven and Earth prioritize life-generation as their conscience,’ further developing it and proposing the idea that ‘each being, including humans, obtains the conscience of Heaven and Earth to become its own conscience,’ meaning that the human conscience originates from the conscience of Heaven and Earth, with a direct inheritance relationship between them.” [9] However, the relationship between the conscience of Heaven and Earth and the human conscience is not only one of ontological inheritance but also one of ontological identity. The principle of life-generation in Heaven and Earth and the principle of human nature related to benevolence are both aspects of Li. They respectively explain why Heaven and Earth engage in the activity of generation and why humans possess the emotional tendency to love things. However, Ren is both internal and transcendent. It does not simply reside within things-in-themselves but is instead related to the subject’s self-existence. According to Kant’s interpretation, being-in-itself refers to the objective manifestation in the sense of external reality, while being-for-itself concerns the subject’s planning of the world based on freedom and self-discipline. Although Zhu Xi acknowledges Cheng Hao’s statement that “the benevolent person is integrated with all things,” he also expresses concerns, stating that “Cheng Hao’s words are excellent, but they are too broad, making it difficult for scholars to grasp.” [2] He argues that “being integrated with all things” is the effect of Ren rather than the reason for concluding that Ren is its essence. “Those who say ‘the self and objects are one’ can see the boundless love of Ren, but this is not the

true essence of Ren as the entity.”[2] Zhu Xi’s aim in dismantling the “transcendental illusion” of Ren is to encourage people to embody and practice Ren through personal effort.

So, how is Ren implemented at the level of moral practice? Zhu Xi, embodying the Confucian scholars’ sense of responsibility, continues the path established by Zhang Zai of “establishing the conscience for Heaven and Earth.” The character Ren reveals that the conscience of Heaven and Earth is actually the purpose of creating all things, and the realization of this conscience depends on the spontaneous generation and formation of all things. However, “Qi operates without intention and cannot avoid deviations of excess or deficiency,” whereas “saints possess intention to serve as the guiding principle, avoiding deviations of excess or deficiency.” Therefore, “saints can assist in the nurturing and transformation of Heaven and Earth, and Heaven and Earth’s work depends on the saints.”[2] It is challenging for things themselves, influenced by biased Qi, to realize the conscience of Heaven and Earth. Hence, the assistance of saints with intention is required. The so-called “intention” refers to saints being the most refined recipients of Heaven’s Qi, possessing the ability to shape and assist in the formation of all things. Zhu Xi believes that Heaven has its own “limitations,” with tasks that “humans can accomplish but Heaven cannot,” such as “while Heaven can generate life, cultivation requires humans; while water can nourish, irrigation requires humans; while fire can transform, burning requires humans to provide fuel.”[2] Although humans and Heaven share the same Li, their functional accomplishments differ. Furthermore, Zhu Xi proposes that saints assist in the nurturing and transformation of Heaven and Earth by “imitating Heaven.”[3] This requires humans to reflect introspectively, deeply comprehend the mystery of the continuous life-generation of Heaven and Earth, and perceive the living Li, order, and benevolence of the universe. Ultimately, this leads to a state where the mind is filled with the principle of Heaven. At this point, saints can “fully realize human nature” and “fully realize the nature of all things,” thereby assisting in the nurturing and transformation of Heaven and Earth.

4. Conclusion

Zhu Xi asserted, “The conscience of Heaven and Earth in generating life is ren; it is through receiving this conscience of Heaven and Earth that human beings can exist. Therefore, the compassion within humans is also a way of life” [2]. According to this perspective, the creation of Heaven and Earth inherently embodies the supreme value of goodness, and this value of life-generation is conferred upon created beings during the act of creation. In the human world, this bestowed value manifests as benevolence toward the beings created by Heaven and Earth. Zhu Xi’s dynamic and all-encompassing concept of Li enables interaction between the metaphysical noumenon and physical phenomena, forming the cosmological foundation of his theory of “Sheng Sheng.” In reality, cows only give birth to cows, and peach trees only bloom with peach blossoms; all things have their “fixed nature.” Zhu Xi identified the biochemical processes of all things as governed by a universal and enduring internal principle: the conscience of Heaven and Earth. Furthermore, the conscience of Heaven and Earth, in terms of its “dominance,” is a concept parallel to the principle of Heaven and Earth. Zhu Xi continued the tradition originating from the *Book of Changes*, using the highly ethical concept of ren to depict the conscience of Heaven and Earth in generating life. By imbuing the cold, mechanistic processes of qi with warmth and ethical value, he demonstrated the cosmological inheritance and ontological identity between the conscience of Heaven and Earth and that of humans. In doing so, he upheld the principle of “establishing the conscience for Heaven and Earth,” a banner raised by his predecessors.

In summary, Zhu Xi bridged the cosmological and human realms through three key propositions: “Heaven and Earth take generating life as their conscience,” “The conscience of Heaven and Earth in generating life is ren,” and “Establishing the conscience for Heaven and Earth.” He extended the human sense of benevolent conscience to encompass all things in Heaven and Earth, endowing the universe with a “benevolent conscience” (renxin) and granting it ontological significance. Using the

benevolence of Heaven and Earth, Zhu Xi sought to awaken the benevolence within human hearts. Based on this, contemporary debates surrounding the “theory of Li” and the “theory of Sheng” in Zhu Xi’s philosophy can largely be resolved. He remarked, “This conscience in generating life is mine alone, and it naturally senses upon encountering things; it is not because those things have this conscience that I have it” [2]. Zhu Xi transcended the human “conscience in generating life” and “benevolent conscience,” extending them to all things in Heaven and Earth through “sensation” and “empathy,” thereby transforming the universe into a perfectly benevolent entity full of life. This discourse became a foundational element of the life philosophy of later Neo-Confucian thinker Liang Shuming, who argued that “life is interconnected with all things in the universe and forms a unity.” Essentially, this aligns with the emerging modern Chinese philosophy of life, which advocates that humans and all things in Heaven and Earth share the same benevolent essence. To live a benevolent life is to achieve a form of existence distinct from mere natural life. From a global philosophical perspective, “Western philosophy lays the foundation for human thinking, while Chinese life philosophy lays the foundation for the human spirit of life” [10]. However, civilizations often share transcendental understandings. In Dilthey’s philosophy, we observe a conscious effort to transcend the subject-object dichotomy, while Bergson noted that “intuition is a kind of intellectual fusion that places oneself within the object to correspond to what is unique and inexpressible within it” [11]. This notion resonates with Mou Zongsan’s claim that without intellectual intuition, “all Chinese philosophy is impossible.” The essence of Zhu Xi’s philosophy, and indeed the entirety of Chinese philosophy, lies in the “presentation of the noumenon through intellectual intuition” [12]. The profound meaning of the Confucian ideals of “the unity of Heaven and humans” and “seeing the virtue of Heaven in human morality,” as represented by Zhu Xi, unifies the meanings of life, order, and ethics. This philosophy not only resonates universally but also continues to play a significant role in advancing modern Chinese life philosophy and the broader scope of Chinese philosophy today.

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